

## The Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project: Vignettes of 6 schools

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The PRAIRIE Group of the UIC 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.” This data brief addresses the characteristics of middle grade classrooms within schools participating in this project. During spring 2007, PRAIRIE evaluators sampled six schools from the 24 participating in the project. The sample was selected purposively to include schools that vary across the following characteristics:

- Size. Two small, two medium, and two large schools sampled
- Location. Schools selected from CPS Cluster 4 (Instructional Areas 10, 12, and 13)
- School configuration. Schools selected based on a variation in departmentalization structure at schools

For the six sampled schools, evaluators collected and analyzed data from the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project’s (C4MGP) university coaches in math and in science, the Area instructional team members, teachers who were part of focus groups held during university math and science endorsement courses, interviews of principals and observations of three meetings of middle grades teachers at the school. Some additional data was also available and considered from prior year’s evaluation of the CPS Chicago Math and Science Initiative.

In this data brief, we describe the configuration of schools in the sample and some of the common themes around which their middle grades are shaped. Then we provide a vignette describing each of the schools as “windows” into the lived experiences of these middle grades teachers. Additional analysis around the experiences of teachers and more elaboration on shared school issues throughout C4MGP will be addressed in a forthcoming data brief in August 2007.

### Description of Sample

The structure of middle school grades (i.e., 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>) varies in the 24 schools participating in the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project. One primary distinction includes the extent of departmentalization in the middle grades. While some schools are completely departmentalized in middle school grades, other schools are departmentalized in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades only and self-contained in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. There is one school in the project where there appears to be no departmentalization in any of the middle grades. This school was not part of the sample we describe in this data brief.

For the departmentalized grades, an important difference, with respect to schools, concerns the ways in which the grade levels are departmentalized. For example, some schools are departmentalized *within* 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades (e.g., there is a content area teacher for every subject for every middle school grade level and each teacher teaches content to one grade level). In other schools, content area teachers are departmentalized *across* 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade so teachers teach content area to both of these grade levels.

We categorized our six sample schools into configuration types to represent the differences in departmentalization based on two questions:

- (1) Are the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades departmentalized?
- (2) Are teachers teaching content area to one or multiple grade levels? Which grade levels are within grade departmentalized and which grades are across grade departmentalized?

In four of the sampled schools, sixth grade was self-contained. In all of our six schools, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade was departmentalized. For five of our schools, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades were across grade departmentalized. One of our schools was departmentalized within 6<sup>th</sup> grade but across grades for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

School	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	8 <sup>th</sup> grade
Paris School	Self-Contained	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
London School	Self-Contained	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
Rome School	Self-Contained	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
Berlin School	Within Grade Departmentalized	Within Grade Departmentalized	Within Grade Departmentalized
Dublin School	Within Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
Barcelona School	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized

### Vignettes

While additional analysis will further discern how middle grade teachers in these sample schools and other Cluster 4 schools make sense of how their schools are shaped and supported, we offer here a preliminary list of some of the key themes of importance.

The schools in the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project can each be characterized in terms of how they are dealing, both structurally and culturally, with the following themes:

- Departmentalization with teachers specializing in specific subject matter
- Endorsements of teachers in specific subject matter
- Advisory classes for students
- Socio-emotional support provided to students
- Work day and work week schedules within which teachers have collaborative meetings
- Building structure and lay out as these influence the flow pattern of students switching classes and whether science labs have water, etc.
- Class scheduling and whether an average of 60 minutes of instruction time for math is available
- Class scheduling and whether 90 minutes are allocated per day for reading
- Availability of time and having a credentialed teacher for 8<sup>th</sup> grade algebra
- Teachers' experiences with and level of use with CMSI math and science curricula

Consideration of these themes are raised in the following vignettes.

## **Paris Elementary School, 2006-07**

### **School context**

Paris School is a small school. The size has dropped over the years but now has stabilized. The students are a very mobile group—more than a third leave the school within a given year. The middle grade classrooms are on average larger than the typical CPS school. There is one content teacher for each grade level, and they have been attending professional development workshops throughout the year around both CMSI-supported math and science curricula. They are all endorsed and (in their principal's and school-based math specialist's opinion) strong in math or science. Paris is departmentalized in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade but not in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It has two hours of reading everyday and students switch for math and science.

### **Description of teacher meetings**

The middle grade teachers met once a week for collaborative planning for about an hour and according to the principal and specialist have done this for years. The tone of these meetings varied, possibly related to who attended the meeting. At one meeting attended by only 2 of the teachers and a literacy specialist, the discussion centered on how they could help each other with language arts and social science lessons. Their students' test on the US Constitution was a major concern and the more veteran teacher offered help to a less experienced teacher. Teachers also talked about helping students with extended responses in writing and having them engage in a peer writing review process. At a meeting attended by the principal and all of the middle grade teachers, the principal steered the meeting with his questions and opinions.

AVID was a major topic of discussion at the middle grades teacher meetings. At one meeting, one teacher asked her colleagues how they used the program and what would help them use it better. The other teachers confided that they were using AVID less than during the earlier part of the school year. Another teacher noted that it worked pretty well when she did use it. However, another teacher explained that she didn't feel very committed to the program and complained that the materials tended to get "all over the place." One teacher planned to get binders to better hold the students' materials next year.

At a later meeting attended by the principal, he explained that, "The purpose of AVID is to prepare students for high school. My concern is that you are not doing all of the components." He then asked about specific facets of AVID like:

- College day
- Checklist
- SLANT and not starting lessons until students are ready
- Cornell note taking with teachers checking on the notes regularly
- Students taking notebooks with them when they change classes
- Socratic methods of teaching

The teachers and the principal dialogued about some of the problems to be solved in order to make AVID work more smoothly. The discussion was fairly candid with teachers stating frankly that they did not do things as intended because sometimes they lacked organization or faced logistical challenges. The principal very strongly made the point that he did not want to hear excuses but instead wanted teachers to figure out over the upcoming summer how to make changes so AVID could be implemented as intended.

At one meeting, teachers and the principal also went over in detail a rubric to be used for scoring extended response exercises in math. They talked through the scoring of a particular example of student work. The teachers spoke about how their Area Math/Science Coach had trained them to use the rubric. On this example, the teachers had been instructed that the work should be scored as a 3 for one area. The principal disagreed and argued that the work should only earn a 2 on that area, noting several times that he was concerned that teachers were making excuses for the student and not scoring critically enough. He told the teachers,

We also need to up our expectations and the students will rise to the occasion. I have 25 years of classroom experience and my students delivered. Students sometimes don't know how good they can be.

### **Description of supports around serving middle grade students**

At Paris, middle grades students have been switching classrooms for math and science and teachers have been using prep periods for collaborative meetings for a couple years. Teachers have been using CMSI math curricula for several years and have supported these curricula with a school-based specialist. The principal and specialist explained that the middle grades teachers know math and science thoroughly.

The principal felt strongly that teaching students reading for an hour each day has been an important support for their success. He worried about the current dialogue around the district regarding eliminating that specialized reading time for middle grades students.

#### **Description of challenges around serving middle grade students**

While the principal believed that the middle grade teachers are strong in math and science, he complained about their classroom management skills and that they do not know how to teach reading. This issue is serious enough that the principal confided that he was going to let one of these math/science endorsed teachers go and “start over.” A few of the lower grade teachers are signed up for the endorsement program in the upcoming year. None of the teachers is close to being endorsed to teach algebra.

#### **Plans for next year**

It is not clear how middle grades classrooms in the next year may change at Paris. The school will need to hire a new math endorsed middle grade teacher to handle grades 7 and 8 if the principal does remove the current math teacher. One of the lower grade teachers is signing up to take middle grade endorsement courses in math, so perhaps they may be considered for this position.

## London Elementary School, 2006-07

### School context

London School is a large school. There are three teachers at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level and 4 teachers at the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade level. 6<sup>th</sup> grade is not departmentalized. All the middle grades have 90 minutes of reading and literacy instruction every day. Two teachers teach all of the language arts and social science lessons. For the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades, one teacher covers all of the science instruction; another teacher handles all of the math instruction, and students switch classrooms in a routine that stays the same day-to-day. There are no advisory periods. Several teachers are working on math or science endorsements and are almost finished. The 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher is math endorsed and is working on the algebra endorsement.

### Description of teacher meetings

During the school year, middle grade teachers met weekly during common planning time. However in May, the principal convened a focused weekly middle grade planning meeting. Her goal was to work with the middle grade teachers to set their course for next year. These one-hour meetings were held after the school day and used Cluster 4 Middle Grade Project funding to compensate teachers. They were attended by the seven middle grade content teachers, the math specialist, university coaches, the principal and the assistant principal. Attendance varied slightly across the weeks but was consistent with either the principal or the assistant principal running the meeting.

At the first planning meeting, the principal initially did most of the talking. She elaborated on her vision of middle grades. In doing so, she was clear with her staff that while she had the final say on who would teach what (and that this depended on who was endorsed) she expected her teachers to “be the decision makers and decide what we will do about block scheduling.” Teachers immediately began asking about the parameters of their scheduling control; for example, asking if they could lengthen the school day. Teachers then began working in small grade-level groups to devise possible block schedule plans for their grades. They talked about the benefits and limitations of block scheduling and departmentalization. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers worked together and the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers worked together.

Some of the benefits of departmentalization they delineated included:

- Teachers specialization
- Consistency for the timing of lessons with specified time for switching classes
- Guaranteed time for teaching each content area
- Teaches students about time management, responsibility, and how different teachers may have different expectations—in preparation for high school

Some of the limitations they discussed of changing into a new configuration with block scheduling included:

- Transitions with some teachers who are not endorsed having to move out of teaching middle grades
- Attendance-taking would need to change (if they switch time of class—have teachers take attendance in every class period)
- Protecting students’ personal belongings when students move from room to room
- Discipline given that student-teacher relationships will not be as strong as they were in self-contained classrooms
- Dealing with Area expectations for literacy preparation if they eliminate morning reading period
- Noise in hallways when students switch classrooms, especially if classrooms for switching students are on different floors

The 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade groups mocked up schedules and continued to work on them during and in between the next planning meetings. Teachers showed up to meetings with laptops and copies of mocked-up schedules. Coaches gave concrete examples of possible schedules and made suggestions on how they might protect student belongings. The group talked about moving different teachers into classrooms closer to each other and even consulting an architect about building improvements that might allow science teachers to have running water for science labs.

By the third planning meeting the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade teams each had master schedules that they agreed on.

### Description of supports around serving middle grades students

At London School, teachers have been involved with CMSI supported math curricula for 4 years and taken advantage of attending professional development during the school week through use of substitute teachers over these years. They have a math specialist whom district support staff consider “very good.” In science, they have been using CMSI supported science in grade 6 for one year and are planning to begin using other CMSI supported science curricula in 7<sup>th</sup>

and 8<sup>th</sup> in the coming years. The 7/8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher is signed up for summer professional development in science.

AVID is being used in 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade, according to the principal. She has found the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project's professional development that she has attended to be very beneficial and "an eye opener to pay attention to my middle school students."

**Description of challenges around serving middle grades students**

Teacher turnover has left the school with many new teachers who have found it challenging to keep pace in the math curriculum. They are supported by their specialist and university coaches with in classroom modeling, and co-teaching. The coaches also have worked with small groups of students who have fallen behind.

**Plans for next year**

The planning process during May 2007 has moved London School closer to its goal of departmentalizing 6<sup>th</sup> grade for the first time and refining the departmentalized 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grades into block schedules that include advisories. The active engagement of school administrators, middle grade teachers and outside support coaches suggests that the planned changes will be finalized over the summer and in place for 2007-08.

## **Rome Elementary School, 2006-07**

### **School context**

Rome school is a medium-sized school. There are two 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers (one language arts teacher and one science teacher) and two 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers (one math and one social studies teacher). The students switch classrooms for all of the subjects; there are 60 minutes of every subject. Currently, at least three of the middle grades teachers have been taking endorsement courses; in the spring of 2007, one of these teachers had almost finished her math endorsement and is planning to pursue a science endorsement next fall. Next year, the principal plans to offer eighth grade algebra but is still figuring out the schedule.

### **Description of teacher meetings**

At Rome school, teachers met for 25 to 30 minutes in structured meetings once a week during students' preps. They also have common planning periods three-four times a week. On rare occasions, teachers met with the principal for 30 minute planning meetings. We observed three consecutive structured meetings with the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. The special education teacher attended one of those meetings and the specialist attended all of the meetings. Although we never observed an agenda being used at the meeting, the teachers told us that they used an agenda in the beginning of the school year.

At all of the meetings, teachers talked about students' behavior. This was especially true in the last meeting we observed since a fight happened earlier that day. At the first two meetings, the specialist updated the teachers on various things, including end of the year activities, the upcoming Learning First, and the middle grade project (e.g. completing endorsement classes and signing up for next year).

At the second meeting, teachers also discussed for 10 to 15 minutes their concerns with the scheduling of reading this year (i.e. integrated with other content). One teacher asked the specialist if they were going to keep the reading schedule the same next year because she's had math "thrown" at her. She explained that it would be helpful for her to teach reading as an individual class so she could teach reading and the language arts teacher could teach language arts. The language arts teacher agreed and said that the school should go back to every teacher teaching his or her own reading class. The specialist explained that the Cluster 4 middle grades project has nine different schedules that schools can look at, which include teachers teaching their own reading class. For the rest of this meeting, the teachers continued to talk about the importance of reading classes and options for next year. One teacher admitted that she did not know that eighth grade students had to take narrative and persuasive tests this year and said that, "when everyone teaches reading, everyone knows about these things." The specialist told the teachers that he would communicate their concerns to the principal. The lead literacy teacher also attended the last two meetings and spoke about school-wide literacy activities. The assistant principal and principal did not attend any of the meetings we observed.

The specialist appeared to lead all of the meetings since he began each meeting discussing updates for the day. At the last meeting, however, the teachers told us that the 8<sup>th</sup> grade department chair was responsible for running the meetings. Aside from discussion of upcoming Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) meetings, the presence of the special education teacher at the first meeting did not seem to influence the conversation.

### **Description of supports around serving middle grades students**

Similar to other schools, Rome school has a variety of programs that support middle grades students. In addition to an after school tutoring program, a three hour Saturday program includes eight sessions of math and reading support to students in grades 3-8 prior to the ISAT. Although the principal shared that she and the assistant principal communicate regularly with teachers to discuss middle school students' academic and socio-emotional needs, the 30-minute planning meetings with the teachers and the principal rarely occurred, as noted by the teachers. Teachers, the principal, and outside supports unanimously regarded the school-based math specialist as a strong source of support. The principal also appreciated the efforts of teachers, especially since they tutored students on Saturdays and did not get paid for it. Also, the principal explained that students felt comfortable discussing personal issues with their teachers. Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project math workshops also served as a support to the principal as she enjoyed learning new information about math and sharing what she learned with teachers.

### **Description of challenges around serving middle grades students**

This year, the primary challenge at Rome was modifying the school schedule to include 60 minutes of math everyday. Prior to this year, every teacher taught reading for 90 minutes, making it difficult for the school to incorporate other preps. This year, as mentioned above, there are 60 minutes of every subject and reading is incorporated across all subjects. The principal explained that everyone seems happy with the new schedule, especially since they never previously had the 10-15 minutes of time for recess that the schedule allows for this year. Despite the principal's positive

outlook, however, in the grade level meetings we observed, teachers discussed the difficulties of incorporating reading into the curriculum and talked about possible changes to the schedule for next year.

Finding time for teachers to attend professional development was another challenge for Rome school. Teachers found it difficult to attend professional development after school or on Saturdays because of the other programs at the school. Unfortunately, as discussed by the principal, an unreliable sub pool made it difficult for teachers to attend professional development during the school day. Often, the principal and assistant principal were needed to teach in those classrooms. The school-based specialist scheduled professional development and encouraged teachers to attend on Saturdays.

An additional challenge Rome school's principal faced was the lack of opportunity to discuss day-to-day operations and ideas with other CPS administrators. Although the principal appreciated the Cluster 4 workshops, with the primary focus of them being on instruction, she missed sharing ideas with other schools in her area.

Another challenge was the variety of socio-emotional issues middle school students from Rome school encountered as discussed by teachers in grade level meetings. In addition to behavioral problems, teachers described students' struggling with the transition to adolescence, their families, hygiene, and neighborhood context. For example, some students had parents in jail and were cared for by guardians.

### **Plans for next year**

Next year, the principal expects the structure to look the same except 6<sup>th</sup> grade might be departmentalized since teachers are getting their endorsements in math and science. As previously stated, the principal also plans to offer eighth grade algebra but is still figuring out how to fit this into the school's schedule.

## **Berlin Elementary School, 2006-07**

### **School context**

The Berlin School is a medium-sized school. Currently, in 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades, there are five different 50-minute subjects for each grade level (i.e. writing, reading, math, science, and social studies). The students met with their homeroom teacher for about an hour and half every day, including lunch, homeroom, and their homeroom teacher's subject. Aside from special occasions (e.g. testing), the students switch classes. The principal described the school day as "very full." All of the teachers are endorsed but some of the teachers were going for dual endorsements this year. Next year, the school plans to offer eighth grade algebra, but the principal was still trying to figure out the schedule. The principal talked about the possibility of holding the algebra class after school with a core group of students.

### **Description of teacher meetings**

The teachers met every week for 50-minutes during student lunch and recess time. Although the teachers could meet everyday during their prep time, the principal commented that they generally met once a week. We observed three consecutive meetings with the eighth grade teachers. The teachers told us that they never used an agenda for these meetings. For the three meetings we attended, the same six teachers (i.e., five content teachers and the special education teacher) attended the first two meetings; for the third meeting, four of these teachers attended. When the special education teacher attended, the teachers discussed modifications to upcoming assessments, including the U.S. Constitution test. None of the administrative staff (i.e., math/science or literacy specialists, and the assistant principal/principal) attended any of the meetings we observed. Also although we did not observe any of these meetings, the teachers told us that they meet in content area groups once a month, before school or during half days to discuss their content areas.

At the last two meetings we observed, several of the teachers arrived 15 to 20 minutes late. The meetings all ended on time. One teacher explained that the meetings usually started late because teachers this year had to monitor their students while the students ate lunch and as such, they had a shorter period of time to eat lunch themselves (during recess). At all of the meetings we observed, teachers discussed plans for an upcoming field trip and preparation for the Learning First assessments. Although at all three meetings, the teachers primarily updated one another on upcoming end of the school year plans (8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, T-shirts, progress reports) and student behavior, the teachers also briefly discussed instructional issues such as an upcoming language arts research project.

### **Description of supports around serving middle grades students**

Similar to other schools, Berlin school had several after school programs (e.g. GEAR UP, AVID, and homework help), which supported middle grades students.

The principal regularly met with the administrative team to discuss middle school needs. She appreciated the ways in which the math/science specialist and the reading specialist supported the middle school teachers:

...monitoring students...giving them information that's come in and tracking their progress.... making observations...

The Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project grant supported Berlin school by providing information relevant to middle school planning and money for teachers to attend professional development. While the principal appreciated the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project meetings, she felt that they took too much time away from school:

Well, as much as I think the meetings are worthwhile, I don't like being away from school...is there some other way we can handle my having to go to meetings...know no one wants to go on Saturday but could be...maybe ask would we be willing to go on a Saturday rather than being away from school or can we do it after school...[I'm] Going to too many meetings...

### **Description of challenges around serving middle grades students**

Similar to other schools, in the 2006-2007 school year, this school had to adjust the entire schedule to account for the 50-minute standard time needed for math<sup>1</sup>. The school dealt with this challenge by collapsing some of the lunch schedules. The principal shared with us that the math teachers appreciated the extra time they had for math classes.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the principal said that they needed to meet the math standard time of 50 minutes, we are aware that the OMS math standard time is 60 minutes.

8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher said that just adding that extra ten minutes, she was able to be on schedule with her lesson...able to cover what she needed to cover...then we supplemented the extra time in the computer lab so (the math/science specialist) was able to cover the extended response part of the math in the computer lab. All of the math teachers had enough time...you never really have time because I'm sure they would like all day, but for their subject they had more time than they had last year to be on target.

Although the school met the time challenge for math, the busy schedule created some problems for teachers. The math/science specialist explained that "since there is no extra time to teach anything outside of subject area, teachers miss teaching other content areas such as reading and other time to connect with students." Coaches felt that the busy schedule led to high teacher stress and similarly, teachers explained that they had to scramble to find time to eat lunch during grade level meeting time.

Aside from figuring out the schedule and adding the time needed for math in the beginning of the school year, the principal did not perceive any other major challenges this year.

The math specialist shared with us that she felt that it was difficult for new students to adjust to the middle school environment since students were used to self-contained elementary schools. She noted, "The kids think we are from the moon because it is so different."

I think the hardest thing for our parents is that we have two feeder schools for our building and because they are coming from self-contained classrooms the challenge is five to ten different teachers and personalities and the kids tend to academically fall off, the sixth graders, for the first quarter until they get their feet wet and figure out how to play the game with the different teachers.

Consistent with the math/science specialist, the principal expressed concern with the middle school structure because in middle school, "teachers aren't able to make connections with students because it's too many students; the school is too big and it's middle school."

Consistent with "too much homework" as a challenge faced by middle grades students at Berlin school, the math specialist also described LSC conversations about the problems of teachers sending too many books home. Berlin school resolved this challenge by providing all students with a home set of books in addition to the classroom set.

## **Conclusions**

Next year, the principal expects the middle grades to look the same.

## **Dublin Elementary School, 2006-07**

### **School context**

Dublin school is a medium-sized school. There are two teachers at each grade level, and students switch for math and science. Middle grades teachers at Dublin are currently getting endorsed in either math or science and two teachers are getting endorsed in algebra. They have a math specialist whom the teachers say is “very helpful.”

### **Description of Teacher Meetings**

The middle grades faculty and staff at Dublin met in a variety of ways this year. Formally, they met two to three days a month for 30-60 minutes in the assistant principal’s office. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers met separately from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. Joining the teachers was always the math specialist who ran all the weekly meetings with the middle grades teachers. Additionally, the principal sometimes joined for part of a meeting, usually roaming in and out of the meeting and chiming in when he had a question or a comment. The assistant principal was sometimes in the office during the meetings, but in general did not participate. Outside support coaches were also present and participated at two out of the three meetings we attended; the teachers confirmed that their presence was pretty routine. In May, the middle grades teachers began meeting once a week after school for about 1-2 hours to discuss issues specific to the middle grades and to begin planning and scheduling for next year. Informally, the Dublin middle grades teachers talked during shared prep time, in the hallways, and “wherever [they] can find a moment.”

At all of the meetings, teachers spent time discussing a variety of issues such as student behavior, lesson plans, curriculum use, graduation and field trip planning, Historically Black College University (HBCU) College Day, scheduling time in the computer lab, and curricular supports for students and teachers like AVID and the Learning Strategy Resource Book. While there were agendas for both meetings at which the outside support coaches were present, there was no agenda for the meeting where no outside support coaches were present. At two meetings—one with coaches present and one without the presence of coaches—teachers shared student work and discussed how the work allowed the teachers to assess students’ understanding of the curriculum and what kinds of lesson plans and activities provided the best opportunity for students to learn and to showcase their skills and understanding. For example, when asked why he used activities from the Learning Strategy Resource Book, one teacher replied that these activities were visually different, skills-based, and used what the students were already using and applying to other things. He said they’re also “a way to assess pacing and what they’re learning.” When the same teacher was asked which activity works the best, he answered that Jig-Sawing and the Learning Strategy Resource book strategies were going well. He also said that the Graphic Organizer was encouraging an active debate among the students, “so they’re learning stuff from each other and are engaged.” And finally, when he was asked which activities lend themselves best to assessment, he replied: “Book reports, lab sheets, and the AVID organizer.”

### **Description of supports and challenges around serving middle grade students**

While the staff and faculty at Dublin were cordial and polite to the PRAIRIE observers, it should be noted that a general tension among faculty members and between faculty and the administration was sensed. This tension seemed more apparent during the presence of outside support and might also explain—or be related to—the general reluctance or inability from administration or faculty to articulate challenges the school was facing in implementing the middle grades project. While the principal and the math specialist admitted that scheduling and planning were a challenge, no other challenges were formally articulated. Informally, some faculty seemed to express frustration with the team meetings, often audibly sighing, frequently checking their watches when the meetings started late (which happened on all three of our visits) with one person even saying: “I could be doing so many other things right now,” seemingly implying that his time was not well spent in the team meeting. Because so much of the meetings’ discussions focused around student behavior issues and how to deal with students’ socio-emotional issues, it could be inferred that a fulltime social worker/counselor was a need at Dublin. It should also be noted that on our third visit—when there was no outside support team member in attendance—the meeting seemed to be thrown together for the benefit of the PRAIRIE observer; it started nearly 30 minutes late and, upon his arrival to the meeting room, one teacher even remarked that he didn’t know there was a meeting scheduled for that day.

### **Plans for Next Year**

Next year, all middle grades teachers at Dublin school are getting endorsed in math or science and the school will offer an after-school algebra program but they still need to figure out how to appropriately credit the students.

## **Barcelona Elementary School, 2006-07**

### **School context**

Barcelona is a small-sized school. There is one class at each grade level, and the school has been departmentalized for some time now with four teachers all teaching across the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels. None of the middle grades teachers at Barcelona School is endorsed, but one middle grades teacher is currently taking coursework for an algebra endorsement and another is taking coursework for a middle grades math endorsement. There is no specialist. Barcelona has a looping method so students see the same teachers for 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. They switch for each class, and they have an advisory period everyday. For the first time this year, Barcelona has tried block scheduling, which gives the students 80 minutes of math two days a week and 40 minutes of math one day a week, with an extended block of science three days a week, and about 2 ½ hours of humanities everyday. Barcelona has also started implementing language learning classes.

### **Description of teacher meetings**

The middle grades faculty and staff at Barcelona met in a variety of ways. Formally, they met during shared prep times and once a week for two hours in the library where the entire faculty and administration was usually present. At all of the meetings, teachers spent time discussing a variety of issues such as cooperative learning, literature circles, reading/writing workshops, scaffolding, reading comprehension strategies, rubrics for writing, cross-grade, cross-curricular content areas, co-teaching, ESL modifications, lesson-planning, websites for teaching technology support and research, as well as more “business management-related” concerns like planning field trips, 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, scheduling, how to deal with students being too loud when they switch, and other student behavior-related topics. The principal typically ran the business-related half of the meetings and lead the discussion on related issues.

At all three meetings we observed, several of the teachers arrived 15 to 30 minutes late. The meetings all ended on time. While two of the meetings had agendas, the agendas were focused primarily on the “business management” half of the meetings. The other half of the meetings devoted more time to curriculum, instruction and pedagogy but never had an agenda. Teachers reported that the discussions around those parts of the meetings were decided at the start of the meetings and usually followed pressing concerns or conversations begun on email, during shared prep period, and /or informal conversations at lunch or in the hallway.

### **Description of support around serving middle grade students**

As stated previously, some of the ways that Barcelona has supported the needs of middle school students was by having teachers team-teach, creating a looping method so students saw the same teachers for 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade, and offering an advisory period everyday where teachers and students could address the socio-emotional issues of middle grade students. In the next year, Barcelona hopes to incorporate sex education in its advisory program and is currently discussing how to do that.

### **Description of challenges around serving middle grade students**

Like other schools, Barcelona has expressed a need for a fulltime social worker or counselor. In an interview with us, the principal stated the following, echoing sentiments we heard expressed at a number of schools addressing middle grade needs:

We don't have a fulltime social worker or counselor, and I think issues that come up there that need support on that level are really critical, and we don't have that because we don't have the staff, so there's no intense way that CPS is looking at the staffing and trying to create something else. I mean, we just have a part-time counselor and the social worker. We just have two days for the whole school. That's where we aren't getting support, so something needs to be discussed and come out of that. High schools are infinitely better staffed than middle school grades, and since many schools in Chicago are K-8, they aren't thinking that the middle school grades... You know, they're just thinking of the academic piece, but that's driven by test scores, so the social and emotional piece also generates something we need to support. A lot of our time and energy is spent helping our kids with social and emotional issues.

Other challenges Barcelona faces is the lack of a bell/indicator for students to switch classes, as well as how to keep the noise level down when there's no staff monitoring the halls. Barcelona also expressed a challenge for teachers to collaborate with others about their specific content since they're a small school with only one middle grades teacher for each content subject.

### **Plans for Next Year**

As stated previously, in the next year, Barcelona hopes to incorporate sex education in its advisory program and is currently discussing how to do that. The school will also continue with the supports that have proven beneficial, like looping, team-teaching, block scheduling, advisory periods, language-learning classes, and regular staff meetings. Middle grade teachers are also discussing ways in which they can communicate more effectively and efficiently with each other and are considering starting a website/web blog where they can each log on and share lesson plans, express needs or concerns, and respond to one another in an open forum. They have even discussed how they might create something similar for students to share information with each other.