EAB

Improving Academic Outcomes for Middle School Students

District Leadership Forum

District Leadership Forum

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Table of Contents

1) Executive Overview 4
Key Observations 4
2) Classroom Practices 5
Background 5
Integrated Support Services 6
After-School Support 9
Social-Emotional Support 11
4) Stakeholder Engagement 13
Data Tracking and Sharing 13
Teacher Development 15
5) Research Methodology 17
Project Challenge 17
Project Sources 17
Research Parameters 18

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Integrate time for individualized academic support into regular academic schedules to reduce barriers to enrichment and remediation opportunities. Administrators at **School A** and **School B** build individualized support time into standard class periods, while administrators at **School C**, **School D**, and **School E** incorporate a period into the school day specifically for individualized academic support. Teachers at School A reserve 10 percent of math and English-language arts (ELA) class periods to implement customized intervention plans with students. Teachers at School D and School E typically assign individual tasks, reteach content to small groups, or provide enrichment activities during this time. Students at School C study virtual content tied to curricular units, take assessments, and set future academic goals during their individualized support time.

Offer additional support outside of regular school hours to fulfill unmet student needs. School C and **School E** offer supplementary support on Saturdays and outside of regular school hours during the week. In both schools' Saturday programming, teachers align support to student needs and often reteach content that proved initially challenging for participating students. Students at School C and School E can also participate in intervention periods outside regular school hours on weekdays. During this additional support time, teachers at School C help students develop personalized learning plans and focus remediation in one subject area per day. Teachers at School E tutor students during these after-school sessions.

Increase investment in individual student growth via thorough data tracking and communication efforts. To identify trends in student performance and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention techniques, teachers and administrators at **School A, School D,** and **School C** regularly engage with student assessment data. Administrators at School C discuss student data weekly with teachers to calibrate instructional goals to student needs. To encourage student and family investment in students' academic growth, School A, School D, and **School B** provide grade and assessment trackers to students and parents.

Leverage teacher input to customize professional development opportunities to best fit school-specific needs. Administrators at **School A**, **School E**, **School C**, and **School D** incorporate teacher preferences in training sessions and solicit feedback on student support services to align teacher support resources with expressed teacher needs. While administrators at School A mandate teacher attendance at professional development sessions, administrators at School E incentivize teachers to attend their optional sessions by including them in teacher performance evaluation criteria.

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2) Classroom Practices

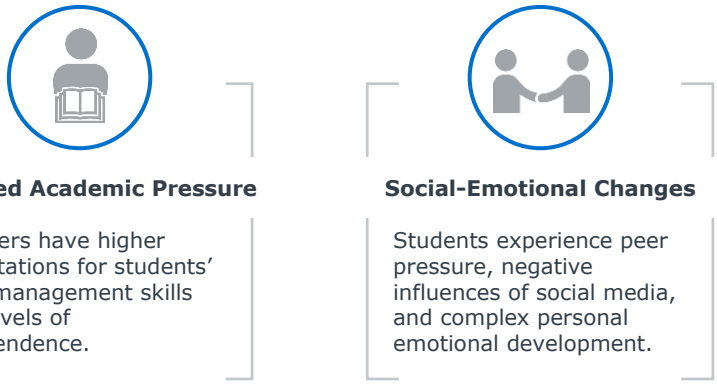
Background

Middle School Students Experience Unique Challenges as They Navigate Academic and Social-Emotional Transitions

Educators find it uniquely challenging to serve middle school students because of students' drastic developmental changes.[1] Middle school students must also acclimate to classroom and school structures that differ from elementary school environments. Specifically, students must learn how to work more independently and manage increased academic workloads.[2]

In addition, middle school students begin to articulate their emotions and reflect on their own development.[3] They may face self-esteem issues as they make new friends and participate in activities at school.[4] Students at this age often grapple with disengagement and emotional distress, evident by the sharp rise in behavioral problems between elementary and middle school levels.[5] Administrators at **School B** and **School A** emphasize that unrealistic academic and behavioral expectations from teachers can exacerbate these pressures on middle school students.

Major Challenges Faced by Middle School Students[6]



Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority populations often experience disproportionate struggles in their personal life that interfere with their school performance.[7] These struggles exacerbate schools' difficulty in serving middle school students effectively.

[1] Pennsylvania State University, "Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in the Middle and High School Year" (Pennsylvania State University, 2017), http://prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/penn_state_middle_high_brief_final.pdf.
[2] Amanda Morin, "Middle School Challenges for Kids With Learning and Attention Issues," accessed April 2, 2019, https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/choosing-starting-school/moving-up/middle-school-challenges-for-kids-with-learning-and-attention-issues.
[3] Pennsylvania State University, "Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in the Middle and High School Year."
[4] Katherine Bradley, "The Main Issues Facing Middle Schools," Seattle Pi, accessed April 2, 2019, https://education.seattlepi.com/main-issues-facing-middle-schools-2232.html.
[5] RAND Corporation, "Problems and Promise of the American Middle School," Rand Corporation, 2004, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB8025/index1.html.
[6] Morin, "Middle School Challenges for Kids With Learning and Attention Issues."; Pennsylvania State University, "Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in the Middle and High School Year."
[7] RAND Corporation, "Problems and Promise of the American Middle School."

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Schedule Overview of Profiled Schools

Profiled School	Schedule Model
School A	• Four 72-minute blocks in sixth and seventh grades and four 48-minute blocks in eighth grade. • Two 44-minute electives every day for all students.
School B	• Seven 50-minute periods daily that include a double math period, a combined ELA and social studies period, and one elective course.
School C	• Alternating block schedule with two 90-minute core classes each day. • Two 50-minute electives meet every day.
School D	• Four 72-minute core subject classes and an elective course daily. • Clubs incorporated into daily schedules every Thursday.
School E	• Alternating block schedule with six 60-minute daily blocks.

Integrated Support Services

Integrate Time for Individualized Academic Support into Daily Academic Schedule to Increase Access to Support Services

Administrators at all five profiled schools designate time within their daily academic schedule to provide remediation and enrichment opportunities to all middle school students. This practice increases student access to academic support by reducing the impact of barriers to after-school interventions (e.g., transportation issues, family obligations).

During these periods, teachers identify student needs and assist them individually to close gaps in content knowledge. In addition, students set personal academic goals during this time and construct academic development plans. To maximize the value of individualized support periods, administrators at **School A** and **School C** emphasize self-directed learning opportunities during these sessions.

At School A and **School B**, administrators provide extra support to students in English-language arts (ELA) and math classes. At School B, administrators identified these as the content areas most in need of school-wide improvement. At School A, ELA and math teachers reserve 10 percent of the class time for personalized interventions. They use Edmentum's Exact Path tool, which generates individualized learning paths aligned with student assessment results, to guide these interventions. Broadly, Edmentum provides online resources, assessments, and services to improve student academic achievement.[8]

At School B, administrators doubled the length of math periods and combined ELA and social studies periods to create two 100-minute daily class periods. While teachers use most of these periods for traditional instruction, on Thursdays, they use the second half of the periods for academic interventions. Teachers group students according to ability and provide supplementary instruction to each small group. Occasionally, special education teachers help lead small group instruction to provide students with more time for personalized support.

[8] "Edmentum Online Learning Programs for Educators," Edmentum, n.d., https://www.edmentum.com/.

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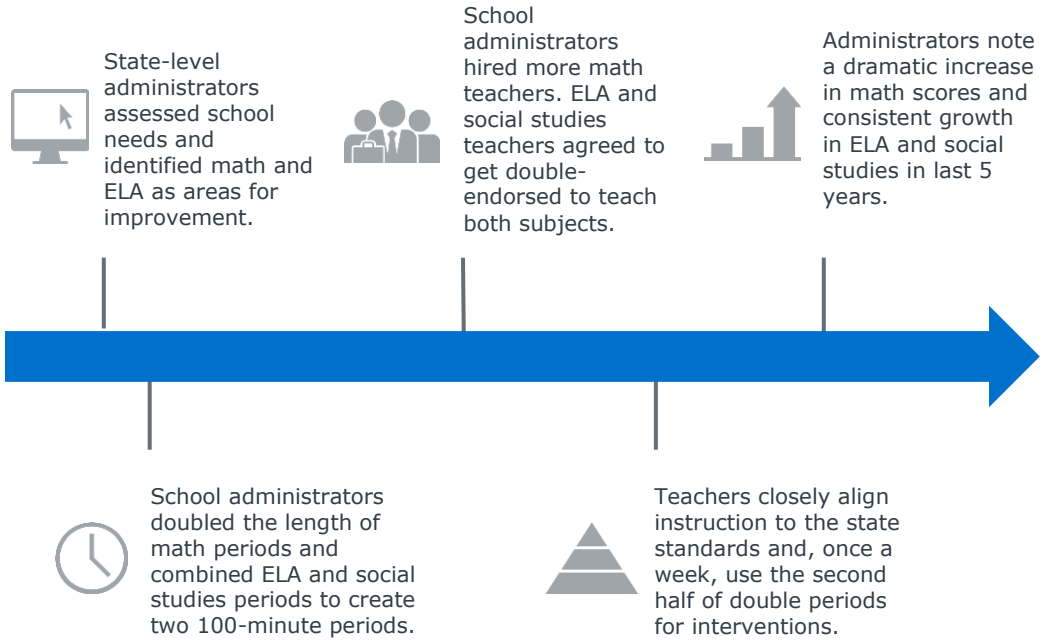
Steps Taken by Administrators at *School B* to Double Length of Math and ELA Periods



For more information on how to incorporate academic support and advising periods into standard daily schedules, please see our report **Integrated Academic Support Time**.

Instead of integrating support time into existing class periods, administrators at **School D** and **School E** allocate about 45 minutes daily for remediation and enrichment. Students at School E participate in this independent study period every day. However, students may participate every other day if they choose to take an elective class that meets at the same time. During this individualized support time, students can complete missing coursework and teachers can answer students' content-related questions. At School D, teachers use remediation time to reteach challenging content. Small groups of students rotate between math, science, and ELA teachers during this individualized support time to receive regular remediation in these three subjects. Every two weeks, teachers assess students on academic progress and reorganize student groups as needed.

At School D, students not in need of any remediation use supplementary support time to work on self-designed enrichment activities. Teachers also facilitate collaborative projects and group competitions to promote critical thinking skills.

Students at School C use Summit Learning Program's online tool to guide self-directed learning during supplementary support sessions. The Summit Learning Program provides standards-aligned curricula, online tools for class work, and professional development resources for teachers.[9] Within a 50-minute period, students learn new content and complete assessments on essential content areas. The assessments instill study skills, such as organizing notes, making flashcards, and learning content in a short time. Based on assessment scores, students set individualized goals for the next support period. Since teachers do not mandate that students complete an assessment each day, contacts at School C report that students often hesitate to attempt tests due to fear of academic failure. However, to incentivize student participation, teachers emphasize students' ability to retake assessments without penalty until they master content.

[9] "Summit Learning," n.d., https://www.summitlearning.org/.

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Structure Weekly Assessments to Reinforce Concepts and Gauge Student Mastery

Students at **School B** take iterative weekly assessments in math and ELA classes. Teachers test students on one to four content standards, adding one new standard to these assessments each week. Students only need to take the parts of the assessments covering standards that they have not yet mastered. Teachers provide a box at the bottom of every weekly test where students can reflect on their test performance and highlight any struggles or doubts. Teachers also use this space to provide feedback on assessment performance.

Invest in Innovative Instructional Methods and Tools to Improve Academic Outcomes

To overcome traditional barriers to middle school student success, teachers at all profiled schools prioritize student-led and personalized learning opportunities. Administrators at **School A** highlight that these types of learning opportunities increase student engagement and, in turn, student achievement.

Strategies Used at Profiled Schools to Increase Student Curricular Engagement

Collaborative Assignments	Teachers at **School A** incorporate opportunities for collaborative learning in assignments and in-class activities. ELA curricula also emphasize interdisciplinary connections between subject areas to increase student engagement with course content across classes.
Interactive Math Activities	Teachers at **School B** incorporate interactive activities in math classes to make students more active participants in their learning. For instance, teachers use pizza and cookie-making activities to teach ratios and fractions through ingredient division.
Student-Led Conferences	Students at **School B** lead 10-15-minute conferences to discuss academic and social progress with their parents. This conference model not only encourages students to take ownership of their academic achievement, but also develops their presentation skills.
Single-Gender Classrooms	The opt-in single-gender classrooms at **School E** places students in single-gender classrooms for core content classes (i.e., math, science, social studies, and language arts). Teachers use different research-based strategies to deliver content to each unique classroom group. Students in single-gender classes tend to perform eight to ten points better on standardized state tests in comparison to their peers in co-educational classes.

In addition, administrators at School A, **School B**, **School C**, and **School D** use external curricular resources to further enhance and diversify content delivery methods. These resources supplement teachers' existing strategies and help provide innovative structures to guide student learning, assessment, and engagement.

Administrators at **School D** conduct observations and walkthroughs to assess the instructional needs of their teachers and provide them with suitable instructional resources.

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External Instructional Resources Used in Classrooms at Profiled Schools

School	Resource	Purpose
School A	**Read 180**	• Core curriculum used to assess student literacy skills – Scores update every quarter – Resources available for struggling readers • Students may take the program as an elective for a year
	Edmentum Exact Path	• Individualized learning paths for students struggling in reading and math • Daily progress monitoring and quarterly student growth assessments
School B	**Pearson Realize**	• Math curriculum and gamified student activities used as a supplementary in-class resource • **Math XL** tool includes assessments to personalize learning for students
	CharacterStrong	• Character-building lessons for students • Used for instruction during weekly advisory periods
School C	**Summit Learning**	• Free resources and tools to implement personalized teaching and learning throughout the school day • Includes professional development opportunities and training for teachers
	DreamBox Learning	• Program used by students to supplement instruction in Common Core math standards
School D	**Open-Up Resources**	• Scripted lesson guides for math teachers • Provides time-based activities and higher-order thinking questions for students • Lists common student misconceptions that teachers address in class

After-School Support

Offer Additional Support Outside of Regular School Hours to Fulfill Unmet Student Needs

For students with more significant academic needs, **School C** and **School E** offer supplementary support for two hours on Saturdays as well as before and after school during the week. Administrators incentivize teachers to lead supplementary support programs through additional compensation. Teachers use Saturday instructional time to reteach content and skills according to the needs of participating students. At School C, teachers incentivize student participation in Saturday programming through in-class conversations. At School E, teachers recommend students attend based on their performance.

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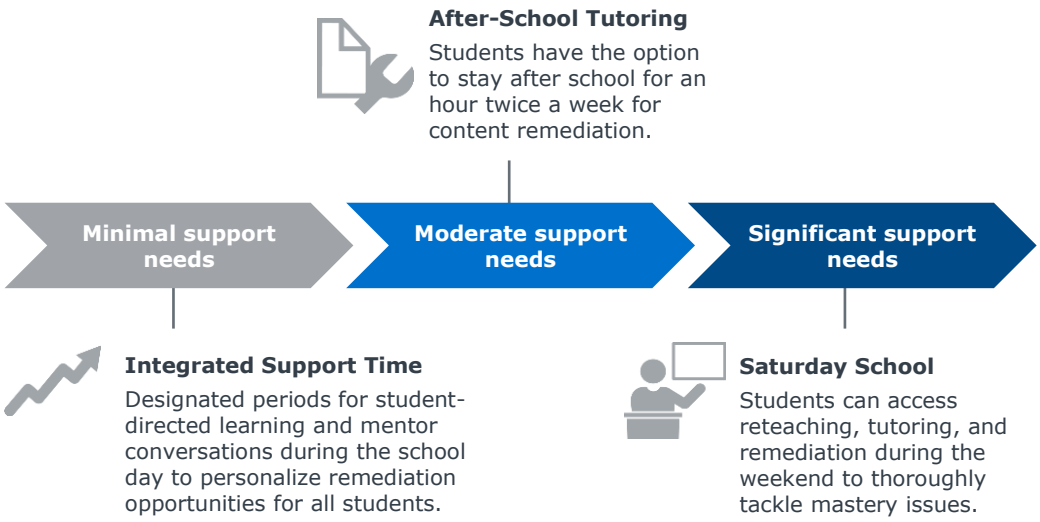
Intervention Strategies used at *School C*



Students at School C and School E can also choose to participate in roughly 75-minute-long intervention periods outside of regular school hours on weekdays. Students set goals in these sessions and work on any topics in which they need additional support. At School C, these intervention sessions occur after school two days per week and before school three days each week. During after-school hours at School E, teachers tutor students in all subject areas. The school administration also provides transportation after programming ends for students in need.

During the second semester at School E, a teacher taskforce remediates students after school to boost standardized test scores specifically. The taskforce targets students based on assessment scores and teacher referrals. School E uses a state department grant for math to compensate math teachers for their additional teaching services.

Tactics Used at Profiled Schools to Increase Student Engagement in Support Services

Teachers leverage in-class conversations and student-teacher relationships to persuade students of the merits of intervention services.

Teachers encourage students to ask for academic support, rather than mandating participation in support services, to develop students' self-advocacy skills.

Teachers advertise after-school remediation opportunities through in-school posters and parent communications.

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Social-Emotional Support

Incorporate Social-Emotional Support Practices in the Learning Environment to Serve Students Holistically

Middle school students experience new social-emotional challenges, such as increased agency in decision-making, self-reflection, peer pressure, and social media influence. Developing students' social-emotional intelligence can have short-term and long-term effects on their academic achievement, while creating a positive school culture and climate.[10] Research shows that students participating in social-emotional learning programs showed higher achievement gains than their peers who did not participate in similar programs.[11] Research also shows that positive student-teacher relationships increase student comfort at school, often leading to higher academic achievement.[12]

Contacts at **School A**, **School B**, **School C**, and **School D** invest in the social-emotional development of middle-school students during the regular school day.

Practices Employed at Profiled Schools to Build Students' Social-Emotional Competence

Community Meetings

Teachers at **School C** run grade-level community meetings every Monday. Community meetings typically begin with students recognizing peers for their recent achievements and thanking peers for support. Teachers recognize students' recent academic and social-emotional success.

Mentor Time

Teachers at **School C** use the last 50 minutes of the day to mentor an assigned group of students. Students converse with their mentor teachers at least once a week. During these 10-minute conversations, student and mentors discuss student development inside and outside the classroom.

Student Clubs

At **School D**, students participate in clubs led by teachers and instructional support staff once or twice a week. Teachers not only build strong relationships with students through these clubs, but also foster students' team-building and leadership skills.

Student Recognition

Teachers at **School B** display trophies and posters to celebrate student success. Teachers pass out tokens of appreciation to reinforce positive reinforcement and strengthen student-teacher relationships further.

[10] Pennsylvania State University, "Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in the Middle and High School Year."
[11] Joseph L. Mahoney, Joseph A. Durlak, and Roger P. Weissberg, "An Update on Social and Emotional Learning Outcome Research," *Kappanonline.Org* (blog), November 26, 2018, https://www.kappanonline.org/social-emotional-learning-outcome-research-mahoney-durlak-weissberg/.
[12] Chandra Muller, "The Role of Caring in the Teacher-Student Relationship for At-Risk Students," *Sociological Inquiry* 71, no. 2 (April 2001): 241–55, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2001.tb01110.x.

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Administrators at School D provide several other avenues for teachers to develop strong positive relationships with students. Teachers engage in one-on-one conversations with students in lower grades to build relationships with these students before they reach the middle school level. These teachers attend sporting events as well to support students' extracurricular involvement. Furthermore, even when teachers reprimand students, they emphasize their own availability to support students in meeting expectations.

For more information on programs like Restorative Justice, please see our report **Behavior Management and Disciplinary Strategies**.

Teachers at School A recently implemented Restorative Justice practices as well—incorporating tactics such as daily check-ins and spaces for students to openly share personal reflections with their peers.[13] Teachers at School A observe that students feel safer in school and with each other as a result of these initiatives. Teachers expect to see these social-emotional improvements translate into academic outcomes, too.

[13] Marieke van Woerkom, "Building Community With Restorative Circles," Edutopia, March 12, 2018, https://www.edutopia.org/article/building-community-restorative-circles.

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4) Stakeholder Engagement

Data Tracking and Sharing

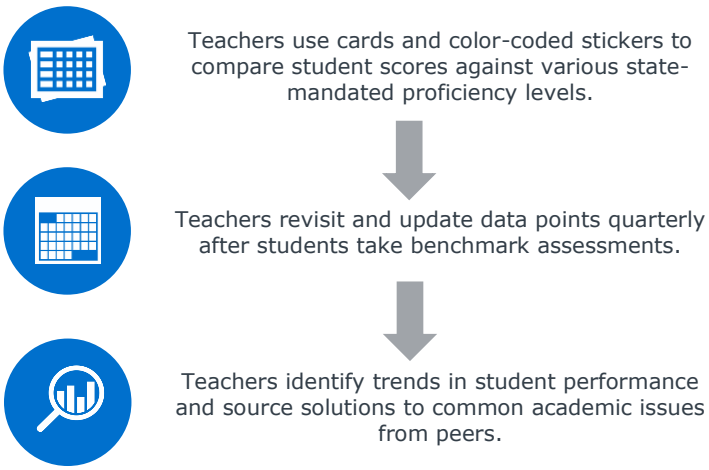
Prioritize Data Tracking Efforts to Increase Teacher Investment in Student Growth

To provide a clear picture of student performance and increase teacher engagement in student support efforts, administrators at **School A**, **School B**, **School C**, and **School D** undertake thorough data tracking initiatives. Administrators and teachers also engage with student data to evaluate the effectiveness of academic interventions. Administrators at School C report that the increased awareness of individual student performance and effectiveness of support practices increases teacher investment in student growth.

Teachers at School A keep individual student achievement data on the wall of an administrative work space (with access to the room restricted to maintain student privacy). To provide staff support for data tracking efforts, teachers at each grade level at School A select one teacher yearly to serve on the school's data team. Each month, the team meets to analyze student achievement data and identify areas for future instructional emphasis to teachers.

Teacher Efforts to Track Student Data at *School A*

Teachers Use a Multi-Step Approach to Track Student Data on a Wall



Similarly, administrators and teachers at School D engage with performance data after students take curricular assessments every two to three weeks. They also revisit data after quarterly benchmark assessments and annual state tests.

Teachers and administrators at School C track data through the Summit Learning platform's assessments. Once a week, assistant principals meet with members of each department at each grade level to communicate instructional priorities based on student data.

Leverage Regular Data Communication to Increase Student Investment in Their Own Academic Progress

Administrators at **School A** note that increased student awareness of their performance motivates them to take ownership of their improvement, participate in

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support programs, and appreciate their progress. To increase student investment in their own academic progress, School A, **School B**, and **School D** provide students with data trackers that monitor grades, assessment scores, and assignments.

At School A, teachers track missing assignments on digital data trackers, which students check during class every Monday morning. Since students can always access their data trackers, they can monitor progress on their own as well. To provide more personalized support, teachers use tracker data to drive quarterly academic progress conversations with individual students. Administrators saw an increase in assignment completion rates after implementing these data trackers.

To further increase engagement in students' own academic growth, students at School D input their own scores into their data trackers. The school's instructional coach designed the tracker in Google Spreadsheets so that students and teachers can easily access data at any time. The data tracker automatically color codes assessment scores based upon progress toward state standards, further contextualizing performance for students.

Students at School B fill out assessment scores themselves on their data tracker sheets. Students record weekly iterative standard-based assessment scores in the relevant box in the tracker document. This enables students to visually track their mastery of each standard.

Excerpt of Data Trackers used at *School B*

6th Grade Common Core Math Standards Quarter # 1: The Number System	Weekly Assessment Scores			
Assessment Standards	**Week 1**	**Week 2**	**Week 3**	**Week 4**
Interpret & compute quotients of fractions and solve word problems involving division of fractions by fractions.				
Fluently divide multi-digit numbers using the standard algorithm.				
Fluently add and subtract multi-digit decimals using the standard algorithm for each operation.				
Fluently multiply and divide multi-digit decimals using the standard algorithm for each operation.				

Involve Parents in Conversations about Academic Interventions to Increase Parent Investment in Student Growth

Administrators at **School A** and **School D** share student data trackers with parents to increase their investment in student performance. Research shows that parental support tends to increase student achievement and retention.[14] To increase parent involvement, administrators at School D organize parent data nights to discuss school improvement plans and student scores. They also use these nights to communicate any major school achievements and changes.

[14] NEA Education Policy and Practice Department, "Parent, Family, Community Involvement in Education," 2008, http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf.

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Administrators at **School C** held weekly parent nights to communicate their adoption of the Summit Learning Program. The platform brought major changes to the technology usage patterns of students due to its virtual content and online assessments. Administrators prioritized transparency in all efforts to increase parent support for new academic support practices—incorporating classroom tours and feedback opportunities during existing school times in addition to dedicated communication nights.

Teacher Development

Customize Professional Development Programs to Ensure Opportunities Fit School-Specific and Teacher-Specific Needs

Contacts at **School A**, **School C**, **School D**, and **School E** incorporate teacher input to customize professional development opportunities to fit school-specific needs. In addition, administrators leverage these training sessions to convince teachers of the merits of academic support services. By persuading teachers of the value of new instructional strategies, administrators increase teacher support for these practices. Administrators solicit feedback on support practices from teachers using surveys and during professional development sessions and weekly professional learning communities (PLCs). Teacher feedback helps administrators determine future training topics.

A diverse array of experts leads the professional development sessions at profiled schools. Experts include department chairs, instructional coaches, blended learning coaches, administrators, teachers, and external trainers.

Administrators at School C and School D organize school-based professional development sessions in addition to monthly district-wide sessions. Administrators customize these sessions to the needs of teachers and students. At School C, teachers and administrators meet for a full day without students to design professional development opportunities that align with student performance needs.

To further customize professional development opportunities to fit teacher needs, administrators at School E appoint two teacher leaders every year to serve as coordinators for the school's professional development calendar. These teacher leaders conduct yearly surveys to identify teacher needs and align professional development opportunities to the school's improvement plan, student needs, testing data, and teacher preferences. They also send out monthly reminders to encourage teacher attendance at professional development sessions. Teacher leaders tend to pursue this opportunity to prepare themselves to serve as administrators in the future.

Employ Instructional Support Staff to Assist Teachers with Personalized Intervention Strategies and Resources

To provide teachers with more personalized professional assistance, administrators at **School A**, **School B**, and **School D** employ instructional support staff.

Instructional coaches at School A and School D model instructional strategies for teachers in the classroom and help teachers select intervention strategies that will be most effective given their specific student needs. Instructional support staff at School B specialize in ELA teacher assistance—providing support both inside and outside the classroom.

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Implement Strategies to Disseminate Professional Development Lessons Across All Teachers

Profiled schools cover a wide range of topics for their staff development sessions, such as educational strategies, educational technology, and cultural awareness.

Administrators at both **School A** and **School E** seek to maximize the reach of available professional development opportunities. To ensure that professional development content reaches all teachers, administrators at School A require all teachers to attend district-provided sessions. For further professional development, math and ELA teachers at School A attend literacy and math design collaboratives with teachers from other districts. These teachers can then communicate transferable lessons to teachers who did not attend to increase the impact of these sessions.

In contrast, administrators at **School E** do not mandate that teachers attend all available sessions. However, to maximize the impact of professional development opportunities, administrators incentivize teacher participation by including professional development engagement in teacher performance evaluation processes.

Encourage Teachers to Collaborate Through Professional Learning Communities and Common Planning Times

All profiled schools use PLCs and other meeting times to discuss how to serve struggling students. Regular opportunities for teacher collaboration ensure that teachers serve students holistically across content areas.

After students take an assessment or benchmarking test at **School D**, **School E**, and **School B**, teachers group students for targeted interventions during supplementary support periods and design instructional plans for these periods.

Teachers at **School A** collaborate to plan lessons and implement interdisciplinary curricula. To ensure students of all English proficiency levels can master content, language arts teachers and language arts interventionalists plan inclusive and personalized lessons together. Contacts at School A prioritize inclusionary practices in the classroom over pull-out practices to serve their significant population of English language learners. They observe greater academic benefits for students using in-classroom support structures compared to those using out-of-classroom resources.

Similarly, administrators at School B provide common planning times for all teachers in each subject area. Teachers use this time to collaborate on assignment design and student support plans.

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5) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What is the current daily academic schedule for middle school students at contact schools?
- What practices did administrators at contact schools employ to facilitate increased academic success across middle school students?
- How do contact schools provide supplementary academic support to middle school students?
- Which staff members support academic interventions for middle school students at contact schools?
- How do administrators at contact schools communicate about academic interventions to students and parents/guardians?
- What metrics and evaluation tools do contact schools use to measure academic success for middle school students?
- How do contact schools leverage social-emotional learning to improve students' academic outcomes?
- How do contact schools maintain a positive school climate and strong school culture when focusing on improving academic outcomes?
- What professional development opportunities do contact schools offer to increase teachers' involvement in middle school academic support systems?
- How do contact schools gain teacher buy-in for the adoption and implementation of new academic interventions?
- How do contact schools communicate the benefits of support practices to teachers?
- How do contact schools solicit feedback from teachers about practices designed to improve middle school students' academic outcomes?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
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Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators at middle schools that enroll students primarily of low to middle socioeconomic status and that have seen recent increases in students' academic performance.

A Guide to Schools Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Enrollment
School A	South	400
School B	Pacific West	500
School C	Mountain West	850
School D	South	300
School E	Mid-Atlantic	1,400

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