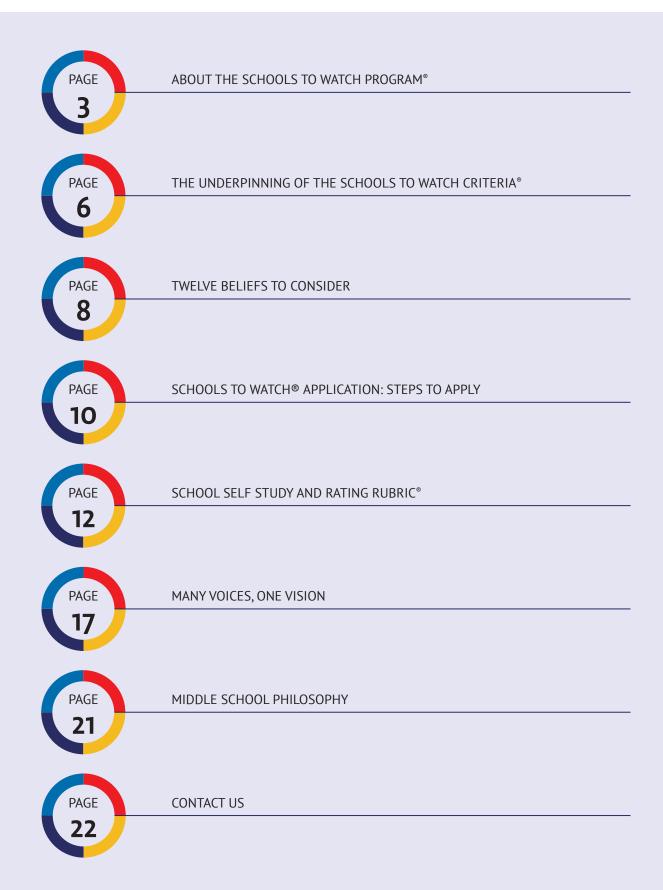# SCHOOLS TO WATCH®

Continuous Improvement Toolkit

High performing middle schools with structures that prioritize developmental responsiveness and social equity, foster academic excellence, and promote a culture of continuous improvement.

NATIONAL FORUM
SCHOOLS TO WATCH®

THE NATIONAL FORUM

Advancing Excellence in the Middle Grades

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ABOUT THE
SCHOOLS TO WATCH PROGRAM®

MISSION

To develop, identify, honor, and nurture schools with middle-level grades (those that enroll young adolescents aged 10-15) that are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, organized and structured for continuous improvement, and are exemplars of the implementation of the National Forum's Schools to Watch® criteria.

VISION

Every middle-grades student (a young adolescent aged 10-15) will attend a school that is academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, organized and structured tor continuous improvement, and is an exemplar of the implementation of the National Forum's Schools to Watch® criteria.

BACKGROUND

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform first convened in 1997. It represented a unique alliance of like-minded organizations and individuals who agreed to work together to improve the learning and healthy development of young adolescents in schools with middle-level grades. The National Forum's shared vision describes what it means to be a high-performing middle-level school.

In order to prepare students to be lifelong learners ready for college, career, and citizenship, the National Forum seeks to make every middle-grades school academically excellent, responsive to the developmental needs and interests of young adolescents, and socially equitable.

Using its vision as a starting point, the National Forum developed a set of rigorous criteria to identify those schools that exemplify the characteristics of high-performing schools with middle-level grades. These criteria became known as the Schools to Watch (STW) ® criteria.

In 1999, once the STW® criteria were developed, the National Forum set out to identify four schools across the United States that would be exemplars for the implementation of the National Forum's STW® criteria. These four schools would be:

- Academically Excellent- they challenge all students to use their minds well.
- Developmentally Responsive- they are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.
- Socially Equitable- they are democratic and fair, providing every student with high-quality teachers, resources, and supports.
- With established norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain continuous improvement and growth.

To find the first four national STW® schools, the National Forum polled its members for nominations. Sixty-four schools were nominated and invited to submit written applications. The National Forum then requested additional quantitative and qualitative data, concentrating particularly on academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and specific norms, structures, and organizational arrangements.

Twenty-eight schools submitted written applications, and National Forum members selected nine of these for one-day site visits in the spring and fall of 1999. Of this smaller group, the National Forum selected four schools for return three-day visits in the fall of 1999 and the spring of 2000. During these visits, extensive data were collected. Dozens of interviews were conducted with students, teachers, parents, administrators, business partners, and the principal. Classrooms were observed. National Forum site visitors sat in on team meetings and spent time with students to gain more insight and information.

The National Forum selected Barren County Middle School in Glasgow, Kentucky and Jefferson Middle School in Champaign, Illinois in May 1999. During the second and final selection round in December 1999, the National Forum selected Freeport Intermediate School in Freeport, Texas and Thurgood Marshall Middle School in Chicago, Illinois.
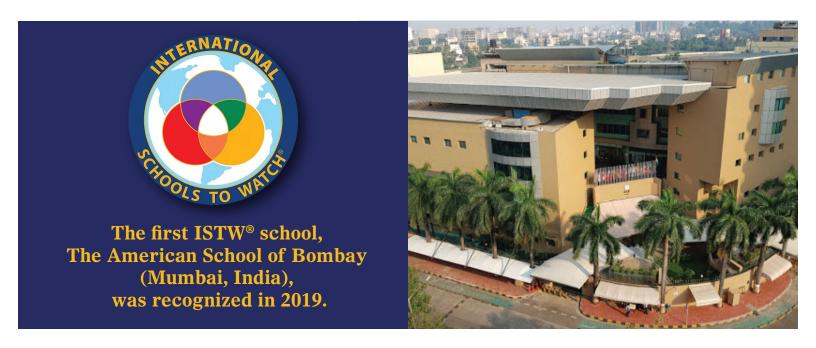
Encouraged by the high levels of interest and energy that accompanied the selection of the four national STW® schools, the National Forum decided to refine the STW® protocols and replicate the national STW® identification process in selected states, with the intent of accelerating and deepening its efforts to promote middle-grades reform. This "refocus" from a national perspective to a state perspective represented the National Forum's desire to get the National Forum's vision and STW® criteria into the hands of more and more policymakers, practitioners, and parents, and more specifically to:

- Establish a common vision and language for speaking about middle-grades school improvement among educators, policy makers, parents, and the public;
- Forge sustainable partnerships among state agencies and organizations seeking to improve middle-grades schools;
- Build the capacity of state, district, and school leaders to assess their own and other schools' performance using a set of rigorous, research-based criteria; and
- Provide exemplars, inspiration, and a peer network of schools seeking to improve their performance.

**Schools to Watch®
Designated Schools are:**

- Academically Excellent
- Developmentally Responsive
- Socially Equitable
- With established norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain continuous improvement and growth

The first ISTW® school, The American School of Bombay (Mumbai, India), was recognized in 2019.

In 2002, the National Forum, in collaboration with Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and Learning Forward launched its Schools to Watch® State Program to identify exemplary middle-level schools in selected states around the country. Through this program, the National Forum has trained teams of education leaders across the nation who, in turn, have identified and recognized hundreds of middle-level schools that are exemplars for the implementation of the STW® criteria.

Initially, the individual Schools to Watch® State Programs tended to focus their efforts primarily on the identification and recognition of exemplary middle-level schools that excelled in the implementation of the STW® criteria in the four domains (academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes). More recently, however, many of the STW® State Programs have begun to assume a more proactive and assertive role in promoting and guiding local school improvement activities in middle-level schools that are seeking to achieve excellence while at the same time continuing to identify and recognize those schools that have already achieved success. The idea that the STW® criteria and protocols are useful tools for school improvement and continuous growth not only for schools seeking to become STW® schools but also for recognized STW® schools has been further bolstered by the experiences of high-performing middle-grades schools who are required to seek STW® redesignation every three years to maintain their status as a STW® school. Many of these schools have successfull y adopted, adapted, and institutionalized the STW® process as their vehicle for maintaining and continuing their positive trajectory toward excellence.

In short, over time the Schools to Watch® State Program has matured and evolved and, in the process, redefined its mission and vision from that of a passive vetting process designed primarily to identify and honor successful middle-level schools at both the national and state levels to that of a proactive, cooperative program intended to grow and sustain at the state level an increasing number of highly effective middle-level schools that are implementing the National Forum's STW® criteria with fidelity and success.

In 2018, the National Forum expanded its STW® reach with the development and launch of the International Schools to Watch (ISTW)® program. This allowed the National Forum's Schools to Watch® criteria to be utilized to identify diverse, high-performing model middle-level schools and programs outside of the United States that demonstrate what all schools with middle-level grades should be and are capable of achieving. The ISTW program gives middle-grades schools in the international community the opportunity to not only achieve recognition the recognition that they deserve, but also encourage the use of research-based, best practices for working with young adolescents to become the norm around the world. The first ISTW® school, The American School of Bombay (Mumbai, India), was recognized in 2019.

THE UNDERPINNINGS OF THE SCHOOLS TO WATCH® CRITERIA

As more and more attention across the political spectrum and within the educational community has been given to preparing students for careers and college, the body of knowledge related to effective pedagogical practices for teaching young adolescents how to read, write and cypher has expanded exponentially. Educators know a great deal in these areas, and many of the STW® criteria are solidly grounded in this research (especially in the area of Academic Excellence). However, learning to read, write and cypher is but one aspect of a young adolescent's overall education, and, unfortunately, the body of evidence-based research for effectively addressing the other aspects of a young adolescent's development is much less robust.

To learn more about how to educate and nurture the whole child, the National Forum has turned to the fields of medicine, psychology, human development, as well as education. From these fields came a wealth of knowledge on the physical, ethical, psychological, social/emotional, and intellectual development of young adolescents that the National Forum has translated into specific STW® criteria (notably, in the areas of Developmental Responsibility and Social Equity). While these criteria may not be grounded in evidence-based educational research studies, they do represent the thinking of knowledgeable and respected experts.

The third source of support for the STW® criteria comes from an educational philosophy that emphasizes the education of the whole child. The National Forum and many middle-level educators believe that a holistic and inclusive approach to the education of young adolescents – one that addresses not only the academic needs but also the personal development needs – is necessary if students are to be prepared for college, careers, citizenship, and an unknown future. A number of the STW® criteria reflect this dual purpose and are grounded primarily in this "whole child" philosophy rather than empirical research.

Finally, and possibly most important, the STW® criteria reflect the wisdom and experiences of middle-level educators who daily translate the research, writings, and philosophy of others into practices, protocols, and organizational structures that effectively educate and nurture young adolescents.

There are four footings on which the STW® criteria rest. Each, in its own way, has contributed to the development of a comprehensive set of best practices and sage advice when it comes to educating and nurturing young adolescents:

- The growing body of evidence-based research on effective pedagogical practices for educating and nurturing young adolescents;
- Scholarly literature on the growth, development, and education of young adolescents;
- A middle-level philosophy that emphasizes equally the academic and personal development of each and every young adolescent (a "whole child" perspective); and, finally
- The wisdom and "real world" experiences of middle-level educators.

In summary, the STW® criteria reflect the art and science of teaching young adolescents, address both the academic and personal needs of middle-grades students, promote positive growth and development of persons aged 10 to 15, and incorporate the insights, skills, and knowledge of practitioners who have spent years working in schools with middle- level grades.

Oliver W. Winch Middle School

A New York State
Essential Elements: School to Watch
• *Academically Excellent*
• *Developmentally Responsive*
• *Socially Equitable*
Re-designated 2015

New York State Education Department - New York State Middle School Association
Statewide Network of Middle - Level Education Liaisons and Support Schools
New York State United Teachers

High Performing Model *Middle schools*

CALIFORNIA
Schools to Watch
Taking Center Stage

LIBERTY MIDDLE SCHOOL
2018 Schools to Watch
Taking Center Stage

Sponsored by CLMS, CDE, and the California Middle Grades Alliance

IS YOUR MIDDLE-LEVEL SCHOOL READY TO BECOME A SCHOOLS TO WATCH® SCHOOL?

Garland McMeans *Junior High*
Texas
Schools to Watch

The National Forum
To Accelerate
Middle Grades Reform

Academic Excellence • Developmental Responsiveness • Social Equ

Re-Designation I

VIRGINIA SCHOOLS TO WATCH

NATIONAL
FORUM

BELMONT RIDGE
MIDDLE SCHOOL

TO ACCELERATE

READY TO BECOME A SCHOOLS TO WATCH® SCHOOL?

12 BELIEFS TO CONSIDER

A certain mindset is necessary to be successful. Before you begin, here are some beliefs to consider and discuss with your Building Leadership Team.

We believe

1 We believe our school should focus on academic excellence for all students, the personal development of each student, and social equity for every student.

2 We believe our school should actively support the mental, physical, emotional, and social welfare and safety of students with programs and services such as counseling, advisor-advisee, health services, developmentally responsive activities, positive incentives, etc.

3 We believe the district (superintendent and school board) must be committed to providing strong support for our school to meet the needs of young adolescents (e.g., financial resources, highly qualified teachers, administrators, and counselors, curriculum and instructional materials, professional development, etc.).

4 We believe it is important for our school to be organized into smaller, more intimate learning communities for students and staff and for interdisciplinary teacher teams to have common planning time to work together collaboratively on behalf of a common group of students.

5 We believe our school's master schedule should be flexible and innovative, providing time and opportunity for coherent, rigorous, standards-based instruction for all students within the school day and must provide students with curricular opportunities in core subjects, targeted intervention opportunities, and exploratory courses.

6 We believe that most teachers should regularly practice a variety of research-based instructional and assessment strategies (e.g., differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, hands-on learning, interdisciplinary projects, etc.), guided by up-to-date, standards-based curricula and systematic data collection and analysis, that engage and challenge every student in their classrooms.

7 We believe that high quality standards-based curricula, instruction, school-wide strategies, assignments, homework, assessments, grading and reporting, enrichment projects and activities should be available to all students.

8 We believe our school should be a community of learners, constantly working and learning together to refine curricula, improve classroom instruction, create a positive climate/culture, and meet the academic and personal needs of all students and all staff.

9 We believe our school should be structured to encourage distributed leadership and to support shared responsibilities between administration and staff.

10 We believe our school should have a progressive and responsive discipline plan that treats all students fairly and equitably.

11 We believe our school should be an integral part of the larger community (elementary/high schools, colleges/universities, local businesses and families, etc.) and that it supports – and seeks support and participation from – this community.

12 We believe our school has the capacity and the will to implement the STW program successfully.

EVIDENCE OF OUR 12 BELIEFS

Spend time with your leadership team discussing your views and pieces of evidence in order to determine if your school is ready to apply to become a School to Watch.

1	
2	
3	
4	
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10	
11	
12	

STEPS TO APPLY

Please follow the steps below to complete the STW® application process.

STEP 1:

Visit our website and make a copy of your state's STW application:
   www.middlegradesforum.org
If your state is not listed, you may download the unviversal STW application:
   www.middlegradesforum.org
If you have any questions, please contact your **State Director** (see webpage) or the **National Forum**:
NationalForum@MiddleGradesForum.org   / 800-326-1880 ext. 1.

STEP 2:

Become familiar with the STW® application. The application consists of four steps:
   • **Step 1:** Self-Study Rating Rubric*
   • **Step 2:** Support Documents
            • Descriptive Information
            • Demographics
            • Assurances
   • **Step 3:** Narrative/School Overview
   • **Step 4:** Submission

*__National Forum's STW Self-Study Rating Rubric__ to be completed online

STEP 3:

Access the National Forum's STW® Self-Study and Rating Rubric.

As soon as your school decides to submit an initial or redesignation application you will need to complete the National Forum's STW® Self-Study and Rating Rubric. All certified staff must participate in this data collection process in order to submit an eligible application. Applications that are submitted by schools that have not completed the self-study will not be reviewed.

To begin the online Self-Study Rating Rubric process, complete the form located at **https://goo.gl/forms/XqiqTHJojPXyPVdK2**

STEP 4:

Complete the **Support Documents:**
Download copies of the following support documents and fill them out, or print the required data.

   • School Demographics
   • Writing Team
   • Assurances
   • State Addendum (if applicable)

Links to access each document can be found within the STW application.

Upload your documents to the **STW Application Uploads** portal with the following file names:

   State abbreviation, school name, document name, year (change the state and school name to match your school). **Example:** NCYourSchoolNameNarrative2024

STEPS TO APPLY

STEP 5:

Complete the **Narrative** section of the application:

To begin the narrative, create a multi-page Google Doc or Microsoft Word document with 12-point body paragraph type, 1-inch margins, a header with your school name, 1.15- or 1.5-line spacing, page numbers, and enough white space and bold subheads to aid understanding for the Schools to Watch principals who will volunteer to read the applications.

1.School Overview
- STW Status
- Contact Information
- Collaborative Process
- Program Information
- Changes

2.Schools to Watch Domain Alignment
- **Section A:** How does your school address the Schools to Watch domains?
- **Section B:** What Are Your Plans for the Future?

STEP
5

STEP 6:

Submit your application to your State Director and the National Forum at **nationalforum@middlegradesforum.org.**

Double check to be sure the initial or redesignation application package includes:

- **Part I:** Descriptive Information
- **Part II:** Narrative
- **Part III:** Recent Changes
- **Part IV:** Assurances
- Completed STW® Self Study Rating Rubric report

STEP
6

STEP 7:

Checklist:

☐ All certificated staff completed the online **Self-Study Rating Rubric**.

☐ The rubric report was incorporated into the narrative.

☐ The narrative, demographics, writing team, assurances, addendum, and dashboard documents were all uploaded via the **Schools to Watch Application Uploads** portal.

☐ We emailed the **National Forum** after we uploaded all the documents.

☐ We heard back from the **National Forum** that all our documents are accessible and our submission has been verified.

STEP
7

Congratulations! You have completed the STW® application process.

STW® SCHOOL SELF-STUDY AND RATING RUBRIC ©

INSTRUCTIONS:

The Schools To Watch® Program is a copyright protected program of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. Criteria established by the National Forum is used as the basis for the Forum's Schools To Watch® Program, which focuses on school improvement efforts characterized by a continuous trajectory toward success. The following Self Study and Rating Rubric© may be used freely by any middle grades or secondary school to study and rate its practices. No adaptations to this self-study and rubric may be used without written permission from the Schools To Watch Fidelity Committee and Board of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. The rubric will take 20-25 minutes to complete.

This is a continuing-improvement tool as well as a mandatory self-rating for schools interested in applying for a state Schools To Watch® designation.

The rubric is divided into four domains: **Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Structures and Processes.** Under each domain there are general criteria followed by detailed examples of possible evidence of the criteria. It is important to note that the detailed example evidence under each general criteria is not a comprehensive, all-inclusive list of practices for that criteria, but rather are examples. Self-rate each general criteria and each detailed example evidence of the criteria. If an example of possible evidence does not apply to your school (e.g., if your school does not have before- and/or after-school tutoring), leave it blank. **Your self-ratings should reflect your perceptions for your whole school, not for your specific classroom, grade level, or subject.** The ultimate goal is to be consistently excellent and rate a well-evidenced score of 4.0 in every component (general and detail) of every section. Even when that ultimate goal is reached, a true high performing middle school will continue to seek ways to improve as new challenges arise.

STW® Rubric Domains:

- *Academic Excellence*
- *Developmental Responsiveness*
- *Social Equity*
- *Organizational Structures and Processes*

SELF RATINGS 1-4 EXPLAINED:

4 A **4** in any general and detail component means the practice is highly and completely implemented, systemic, coherent in every classroom, by every teacher, across the school.

3 A **3** in any general and detail component means that there is a high degree or maturing quality of implementation that is systemic, but it may not be coherent or of the highest quality in every classroom and by every teacher, but certainly by most, 75 percent or better.

2 A **2** in any general and detail component means that there is a mixed, fair, immature quality of implementation. A 2 also means that practices may include many teachers but not the majority. The program may be too new to have realized accountable results or to be evaluated as effective.

1 A **1** in any general and detail component means that the practice may just have gotten started, (very immature), or is only practiced by a handful of practitioners.

NOTE: Throughout the rubric, references to "All Students" mean English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, students living in poverty, and any other subgroup of students served at your school.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent.
They challenge all students to use their minds well.

GENERAL CRITERIA	DETAILED EXAMPLE EVIDENCE OF CRITERIA	SELF-RATING	
1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards	Expectations are clear for students and parents.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Teachers provide students with exemplars of high quality work that meet the performance standard or level so that students know what high quality work should be like.	4 3 2 1	
	Students revise their work based on meaningful feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard or level.	4 3 2 1	_____
2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards.	The vision guides what students should know and be able to do, and it is coherent.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Students and teachers understand what students are learning and why. In any class and at any time, students can explain the importance of what they are learning.	4 3 2 1	
	The curriculum is rigorous, non-repetitive, and moves forward substantially.	4 3 2 1	
	Work is demanding and steadily progresses.	4 3 2 1	_____
3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.	Teachers make connections across the disciplines to reinforce important concepts and assist students in thinking critically and applying what they have learned to solve real-world problems.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Teachers incorporate academic and informational literacy into their course work (i.e., reading, writing, note taking, researching, listening, and speaking).	4 3 2 1	_____
4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught.	To reach students, teachers draw from a common subset of instructional strategies and activities such as the following examples:	4 3 2 1	Average:
	• Direct instruction	4 3 2 1	
	• Cooperative learning	4 3 2 1	
	• Project-based learning	4 3 2 1	
	• Inquiry-based learning/simulations	4 3 2 1	
	• Integrated technology	4 3 2 1	
	• Differentiated instruction	4 3 2 1	
	• Personalized learning	4 3 2 1	
	• STEM/STEAM activities	4 3 2 1	_____
5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, student conferences, etc.).	Teachers use common, frequent, formative assessments to check for understanding of key concepts and the achievement of their students.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Teachers use formative assessment results to inform/guide instruction.	4 3 2 1	
	Teachers use common, frequent, summative assessments to check for understanding of key concepts and the achievement of their students.	4 3 2 1	
	Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards, expectations, or levels.	4 3 2 1	_____
6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards.	Students are provided more time to learn the content, concepts or skills if needed.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, enrichment, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning.	4 3 2 1	_____
7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards.	Teachers know what each student has learned and still needs to learn.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Students have multiple opportunities to succeed and receive extra help as needed, such as:		
	o co-teaching or collaborative resource model	4 3 2 1	
	o support and intervention classes	4 3 2 1	
	o before-and/or after-school tutoring	4 3 2 1	_____
8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice	Teachers collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement.	4 3 2 1	_____
	Teachers participate in learning walks/instructional rounds.	4 3 2 1	

DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS

High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

GENERAL CRITERIA	DETAILED EXAMPLE EVIDENCE OF CRITERIA	SELF-RATING	
1. **The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.**	Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (e.g., teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.	4 3 2 1	
	Every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in a relationship with throughout the middle grades experience.	4 3 2 1	
	Pedagogy reflects and utilizes the uniqueness of each learner relative to brain research, learning styles/modalities, and/or temperaments.	4 3 2 1	
	Students have regular opportunities to participate in physical development activities, (e.g., recess, clubs, extracurricular programs).	4 3 2 1	_____
2. **The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.**	Teachers are educated on ways to recognize student problems and when necessary, refer to the appropriate staff member.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Students with difficulties, and their families, can get assistance.	4 3 2 1	
	The school houses a wide range of support (e.g., nurses, counselors, resource teachers) to help students and families.	4 3 2 1	
	The school offers parent education activities involving families.	4 3 2 1	_____
3. **All teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment.**	Teachers enhance standards-based learning by using a wide variety of instructional strategies.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Teachers incorporate well-developed procedures and routines for effective classroom management.	4 3 2 1	
	Teachers facilitate learning by deliberately teaching study and organizational skills.	4 3 2 1	
	Teachers integrate creative activities in the lessons (e.g., current technologies, visual and performing arts, etc.).	4 3 2 1	_____
4. **The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.**	Students are routinely provided opportunities in classes to talk about issues in their own lives, their community and their world.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Students take action, make informed choices, work collaboratively, and learn to resolve conflicts.	4 3 2 1	
	Students are provided opportunities to participate in decisions about topics of study.	4 3 2 1	_____
5. **Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems.**	Teachers collaborate to create integrated activities that cross content boundaries.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Students can work on the same project in several different classes.	4 3 2 1	_____
6. **Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.**	Teachers and counselors provide opportunities to students to challenge themselves and set high academic, college, and career goals for their future.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Students are provided with multiple opportunities to explore topics of interest to them.	4 3 2 1	
	Students demonstrate competency in a variety of subjects as well as areas of interest.	4 3 2 1	_____
7. **Students have opportunities for voice - posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.**	All students have opportunities to participate in, or be represented (demographically, socio-economically, etc.) in what happens at school.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	School staff members have an "open-door" policy to encourage student involvement and connection.	4 3 2 1	
	Students take an active role in school-family conferences and/or meetings.	4 3 2 1	_____
8. **The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.**	Parents are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision-makers in their children's education.	4 3 2 1	
	The school uses an extensive array of communication strategies to encourage parent involvement.	4 3 2 1	_____
9. **Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community.**	Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and/or world.	4 3 2 1	_____
	Members of the community engage in meaningful learning opportunities with the school.	4 3 2 1	
10. **The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment.**	Student co-curricular activities include a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Co-curricular programs are infused with activities that help students develop relevant life skills.	4 3 2 1	_____

SOCIAL EQUITY

High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

GENERAL CRITERIA	DETAILED EXAMPLE EVIDENCE OF CRITERIA	SELF-RATING	
1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations.	Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports.	4 3 2 1	_____
	Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid.	4 3 2 1	
2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.	Teachers differentiate instruction in order to give each student equal opportunity to comprehend the standards-based curriculum.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Teachers provide a variety of learning experiences so all students have opportunities to master a challenging curriculum.	4 3 2 1	
	Teachers provide learning activities that represent varying learning styles so all students have opportunities to master standards.	4 3 2 1	_____
3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.	The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and assessment to better meet student needs.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Teachers assess mastery continuously and modify their instruction to meet current needs.	4 3 2 1	
	The schedule provides flexibility for teachers to meet the specific instructional needs of students.	4 3 2 1	_____
4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.	To the fullest extent possible, students use technology to do research and analyze data, read more than textbooks, and understand how to solve complex problems.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	To the fullest extent possible, students with disabilities are in regular education classrooms.	4 3 2 1	_____
	All students have access to interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities.	4 3 2 1	
5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures.	The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school, community, and our nation.	4 3 2 1	
	Materials in the media center represent all of the cultures of the students.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Families have opportunities to share their traditions and beliefs (e.g., international night, talent show, hall of flags).	4 3 2 1	
	Multiple viewpoints are encouraged and the school ensures they are reflected in the curriculum and instruction in order to reflect the ethnic diversity of students.	4 3 2 1	_____
6. The school community knows every student well.	Each student is appreciated and respected.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways.	4 3 2 1	
	Every student has an adult advocate and supporter in the school.	4 3 2 1	_____
7. To the fullest extent possible, the faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school.	Efforts are made to eliminate barriers (e.g., transportation, childcare, translation) to attend school events.	4 3 2 1	
	Multiple forms of communication are used with families and communication is two way (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, email).	4 3 2 1	
	Families have a voice in the decision-making process of the school (e.g., parent coffees, PTA/PTO, school-based councils, parent advisory group).	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Opportunities are provided for families to engage in supporting student learning (e.g., parenting classes, literacy programs, accessing information about student progress, making meaningful connections to the curriculum).	4 3 2 1	_____
	The school creates opportunities for families to understand what students are learning and why.	4 3 2 1	
8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.	The faculty recognizes the contributions of all its students.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors.	4 3 2 1	_____
9. To the fullest extent possible, staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of its students.	The school makes a special effort to recruit a culturally and linguistically diverse staff.	4 3 2 1	Average:
	Professional development is provided to help staff members understand, value, and respond to student and family diversity and the school's community.	4 3 2 1	_____
10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.	Students and parents are informed of school rules and understand the consequences if students break the rules.	4 3 2 1	
	Staff members routinely analyze and act upon referral and suspension data to make sure that no one group of students is unfairly singled out by classroom and school staff.	4 3 2 1	Average:
15.	The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one another.	4 3 2 1	_____

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

High-performing schools with middle grades establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

GENERAL CRITERIA	DETAILED EXAMPLE EVIDENCE OF CRITERIA	SELF-RATING				
1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does, drives every facet of school change.	The shared vision drives constant improvement.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose.	4	3	2	1	
	Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions.	4	3	2	1	_____
2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication.	Lines of leadership for the school's improvement efforts are clear.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	The school leadership team has assumed the responsibility to make things happen.	4	3	2	1	
	The principal makes sure that assignments for staff are clear and explicit and are completed in a timely manner.	4	3	2	1	_____
	School leadership fosters and supports the development of teacher leaders.	4	3	2	1	
3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and the opportunity for reflection are the norm.	School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture.	4	3	2	1	
	Learning is on-going for everyone.	4	3	2	1	
	Improvement plans are flexible and inclusive in meeting the needs of all students	4	3	2	1	_____
	The school community is student-centered.	4	3	2	1	
4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional learning, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement.	Professional learning is intensive, of high quality, ongoing, and relevant to middle-grades education.	4	3	2	1	
	Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e., classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.).	4	3	2	1	Average:
	Opportunities for learning increase knowledge and skills, challenge outmoded beliefs and practices, and provide support in the classroom.	4	3	2	1	_____
5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships.	Deliberate vertical articulation and transition programs exist between feeder elementary schools and destination high schools.	4	3	2	1	
	Deliberate articulation of curriculum between feeder elementary schools and destination high schools occurs.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	The district supports through funding and time its schools' participation in best practice networks, associations, learning communities, and professional learning focused on middle grades improvement and achievement.	4	3	2	1	_____
	The school and district work collaboratively to bring coherence to curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, data collection, analysis, and accountability for student achievement.	4	3	2	1	
6. The school staff holds itself accountable for student success.	The school collects, analyzes, and uses data (e.g., attendance, academics, behavior, parent surveys, etc.) as a basis for making decisions.	4	3	2	1	
	School-generated evaluation data are used to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	The school staff intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question.	4	3	2	1	_____
	The school leadership and teachers use data to examine instruction and determine instructional improvement.	4	3	2	1	
7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students.	Barriers are viewed as challenges, not problems.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	District and school staff assess and evaluate current programs regularly and adapt them as needed to maximize the level of student mastery.	4	3	2	1	_____
8. The school staff and district staff partner with colleges and universities.	A mentoring program for new teachers is in place.	4	3	2	1	
	The principal or district contacts colleges and universities when necessary for potential recruitment of new teachers.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	The school or district works collaboratively with colleges and universities to assist pre-service teachers.	4	3	2	1	_____
	The school or district works with colleges and universities to provide professional development to faculty at the school.	4	3	2	1	
9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance.	Families and community members are informed about the school's goals for student success and students' responsibility for meeting those goals.	4	3	2	1	
	Representatives of all stakeholders are engaged in ongoing and reflective conversation and decision making about governance to promote school improvement.	4	3	2	1	Average:
	The school provides programs, resources, or information to educate families about adolescent behavior, school transition, etc.	4	3	2	1	_____

MANY VOICES, ONE VISION

Many organizations and authors have articulated the need to provide schools and learning experiences that meet the unique needs of young adolescents. The following table demonstrates how the voices of the *National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform/Schools to Watch®, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), Turning Points 2000, and the Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence* converge to form a consistent vision for effective middle level education.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

NATIONAL FORUM SCHOOLS TO WATCH®	BUILDING RANKS NASSP	THIS WE BELIEVE AMLE	TURNING POINTS 2000 (JACKSON & DAVIS, 2000)	BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE
Academic Excellence High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.	• Each school will identify a set of essential learnings. • Curriculum will connect to real-life applications of knowledge and skills. • Teachers will teach in ways that result in student acquisition of knowledge, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. • Teachers will integrate assessment into instruction using a variety of methods. • Schools will develop a plan to make technology integral to curriculum, instruction, and assessment.	• Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. • Varied, ongoing assessments advance learning and measure it. • Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.	• Curriculum grounded in rigorous standards, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how adolescents learn best • Instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve standards and become lifelong learners	• Challenging standards and curriculum • Active teaching and learning • Technology integration • Indicators of success

17.

DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS

NATIONAL FORUM SCHOOLS TO WATCH®	BUILDING RANKS NASSP	THIS WE BELIEVE AMLE	TURNING POINTS 2000 (JACKSON & DAVIS, 2000)	BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE
Developmental Responsiveness High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.	• Each student will have a personal plan for progress. • Teachers will design high-quality work and teach in ways that engage students. • Teachers will know and be able to use a variety of strategies and settings that accommodate individual learning needs and engage students. • Teachers will have a broad base of academic knowledge, with depth in at least one subject area. • Schools, in conjunction with agencies, will coordinate physical, mental health, and social services. • Each school will present alterna-tives to tracking and ability grouping.	• Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them. • Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches. • Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices. • Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.	• Teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents	• Student focus and support

SOCIAL EQUITY

NATIONAL FORUM SCHOOLS TO WATCH®	*BUILDING RANKS* NASSP	*THIS WE BELIEVE* AMLE	*TURNING POINTS 2000* (JACKSON & DAVIS, 2000)	BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE
Social Equity High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.	• The school community will advocate and model a set of core values essential in a democratic and civil society. • The school community will promote policies and practices that recognize diversity with the core values of a democratic and civil society. • The school will engage students' families as partners in the students' education.	• The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all. • The school actively involves families in the education of their children.	• Governed democratically by the adults who know students best • Safe and healthy school environment improve academic performance and develop caring, ethical citizens	* School- family partnerships

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

NATIONAL FORUM SCHOOLS TO WATCH®	BUILDING RANKS NASSP	THIS WE BELIEVE AMLE	TURNING POINTS 2000 (JACKSON & DAVIS, 2000)	BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE
Organizational Structures and Processes High performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.	• Principal will provide leadership and build and maintain vision. • Schools will create small units in which anonymity is banished. • Each student will have a personal adult advocate • Teachers and teacher teams will provide leadership. • Each school will develop flexible scheduling and student grouping patterns. • Every school will be a learning community. • Schools will build partnerships with institutions of higher education. • Schools will develop political and financial relationships.	• A shared vision development by all stakeholders guides every decision. • Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. • Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices. • Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. • An adult advocate guides every student's academic and personal development. • The school includes community and business partners.	• Teachers engaged in ongoing, targeted professional development • Organized relationships for learning, climate of intellectual development, and caring community of shared educational purpose • Involved parents and communities supporting student learning and healthy development	• School organization and culture • Professional community • Leadership and education vitality • School-community partnerships

INFORMATION ON MIDDLE SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY

The following resources are just a sample of the information available about effective middle grades pedagogy. They should provide helpful information to enhance understanding of the middle school concept and effectively educating the young adolescent.

CITATIONS:

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National Middle School Association. (2010). *Research and resources in support of This We Believe.* Westerville, OH: Author.

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CONTACT US

If you have questions regarding The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform Schools to Watch® Program, please feel free to contact us! We are happy to assist.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle -Grades Reform

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