

K-12 Partnership *Report*

The Middle Grades Partnership

In the STEM education reform discussion, it's a given that urban school districts are an untapped source of the potential STEM workforce. In addition to large numbers of students, urban areas offer the infrastructure necessary to teach STEM disciplines: many corporations are based there; government tends to focus its efforts on these populations; and, of course, the majority of potential customers live in and around urban centers. It makes sense that education reform efforts should focus on the nation's cities.

Unfortunately, urban school districts are among worst in the country in terms of achievement. An ongoing partnership in Baltimore, Maryland serves as a potential model for those seeking to enter into education reform.

The Middle Grades Partnerships (MGP) in Baltimore is a public-private partnership designed to raise academic achievement among public middle school students who have had some success in the city schools, and focuses on preparing participating students for rigorous academic coursework in high school and college. Teachers and administrators from participating private and public schools work collaboratively to design challenging academic experiences in summer school sessions at the private schools and after school sessions at public middle schools, all of which are designed to meet the standards set by the MGP and individualized by the teachers and schools involved.

The idea behind the partnership percolated from the experiences of Thomas Wilcox, current President of the Baltimore Community Foundation (BCF) and former Head of School of Concord Academy in Boston, Massachusetts. Mr. Wilcox started City Bridge in Boston, where students from the private Concord Academy taught public school students in Boston and Cambridge. In addition to BCF, the Morton K. and Jane Blaustein Foundation (MJBF) has been a primary supporter of the initiative.

The project itself grew out of a 2004 conference hosted by the BCF, MJBF and the Johns Hopkins Center for Summer Learning. Entitled "Forum on Summer Learning Opportunities in Independent Schools," the conference included local school teachers, administrators,

development officers, trustees, foundation staffs, and interested community members who gathered to hear more than 20 representatives of public/independent school partnership programs from across the nation describe their programs and inspire those in Baltimore to plan their own partnership.

The Middle Grades Partnership

Where:

Baltimore, Maryland

Partner(s):

Two foundations - the Baltimore Community Foundation and the Morton K. and Jane Blaustein Foundation - and several local private schools

Challenge:

Prepare middle school students who had experienced some academic success in urban public schools for rigorous high school and college-level work.

Solution:

The Baltimore Community Foundation led the exploration of a coordinated set of partnerships between local public and private schools. Working with foundation support, these partnerships would ascribe to a set of objectives and collaboratively pursue them through after school and summer programs.

Partner Roles:

Teachers and administrators at partnering public and private schools work together to set the course of instruction. After school programs, hosted at partnering public schools, focus on academics with an emphasis on reading and mathematics. Summer programs, hosted at partnering private schools, expand this academic focus with arts, athletics, and personal development.

Outcomes:

Evaluation of the Middle Grades Partnership is being conducted by Johns Hopkins University. Initial efforts focused on formative evaluation; current efforts are examining outcomes against comparable groups of students. Based on an analysis of initial data, students participating in the program are making noticeable advances in reading and math, and are being prepared for a rigorous course of study at the high school level.

Development and scope of MGP

As a result of the 2004 conference, public and independent school administrators and teachers began working together to identify a target population and develop the MGP's curricular goals. Project planners quickly settled on middle school students as a target audience, since the middle grades "are the last opportunity we have to transform kids' habits of mind," said Beth Drummond Casey, director of the Middle Grades Partnership. "At the end of the day, they are still children," which provides an academic advantage in terms of focus and development.

As an overarching objective, they decided that students completing the program would be:

- Intuitive, flexible, and confident mathematical thinkers
- Insightful, fluent, and ardent readers
- Capable, straightforward, incisive writers

With these objectives in mind, twelve MGP sites

were chosen and individual sites were given free reign to design their own program to meet the agreed-upon goals. After school programs focus heavily on academics; summer programs incorporate arts, athletics, and personal development into the mix. During the school-year, students participate in two after school sessions per week and at least four Saturday activities, all at a public school site. Summer programs, held on private school campuses, run for four or five weeks.

Program staff themselves develop the curriculum. Each site is self-managed, but all work toward the same goals. Individual partnerships will write a proposal for a grant that offers more than the curriculum. "We work closely with grantees," said Casey, which means that the partnership monitors ongoing projects and makes suggestions for adjustments as individual projects go forward.

Going into its fourth year, MGP graduates have completed Algebra I, written clear and convincing essays, and have developed a willingness to read for both pleasure and in their studies. Much attention has been

A Note on Building Evaluation Models

Evaluation is an integral component of education reform efforts, and there is some controversy surrounding evaluation methods and outcomes. This controversy might best be summarized by conflicting statements provided by the American Evaluation Association on the Department of Education's adoption of randomized clinical trials as the "gold standard" for education evaluation.

Without getting into the middle of this controversy, the best way to demonstrate it and hopefully provide context for evaluation efforts concerning the MGP and other partnership-driven projects would be to highlight competing statements submitted as commentary on the Department's position.

While we agree with the intent of ensuring that federally sponsored programs be "evaluated using scientifically based research . . . to determine the effectiveness of a project intervention," we do not agree that "evaluation methods using an experimental design are best for determining project effectiveness." We believe that the constraints in the proposed priority would deny use of other needed, proven, and scientifically credible evaluation methods, resulting in fruitless expenditures on some large contracts while leaving other public programs unevaluated entirely. Statement prepared by: Randall Davies, Ernest House, Cheri Levenson, Linda Mabry (chair), Sandra Mathison and Michael Scriven. This team received valuable assistance from: Lois-ellin Datta, Burt Perrin, Katherine Ryan, and Bob Williams.

An influential group of senior members of the American

Evaluation Association opposed this AEA Statement, and did not feel they were appropriately consulted as active, long-term members of AEA. They provided the following opposition statement to the one above:

... [W]e recognize that randomized trials are not feasible or ethical at times. In such circumstances, quasi-experimental or other designs may be appropriate alternatives, as the proposed priority allows. However, it has been possible to configure practical and ethical experimental designs in such complex and sensitive areas of study as pregnancy prevention programs, police handling of domestic violence, and prevention of substance abuse. It is similarly possible to design randomized trials or strong quasi-experiments to be ethical and feasible for many educational programs. In such cases, we believe the Secretary's proposed priority gives proper guidance for attaining high methodological standards and we believe the nation's children deserve to have educational programs of demonstrated effectiveness as determined by the most scientifically credible methods available. Signed by Leonard Bickman, Robert F. Boruch, Thomas D. Cook, David S. Cordray, Gary Henry, Mark W. Lipsey, Peter H. Rossi, and Lee Sechrest.

In this context, it is important to point out that there is a struggle among the education community on what constitutes effective evaluation and how specific programs are evaluated. The evaluation presentation in this study simply provides the approach being taken in this specific case.

For more information, see:

www.wmich.edu/evalctr/jmde/content/JMDE%20Num%203_files/Webpages%20JMDE%20003/JMDE_003_Part_I.htm#_Toc116196689

focused on the program's focus on algebra and higher mathematics, and there is a reason it has become a key element of the program. "Algebra is a gateway course to higher education," Casey explains. Research shows that success in higher level math is a determinant of postsecondary graduation. But the program's other elements are just as important "Each individual project site reflects great thinking and an integrated curriculum," she added. "Academically the instruction looks and feels and acts un-school like."

Evaluation

Although an ongoing evaluation is being conducted in tandem with the project, preliminary district data show marked improvement among students involved in the MGP. At this writing, data have been made available that show that test scores have improved among the target population of students. Scores for the Terra Nova composite test indicate participating students' ability to compete for entrance to the city's most academically rigorous high schools. The threshold score for consideration for entrance to these high schools is 610. "We've heard from two schools," Casey said. "One school has some composite scores in the 700s." Preliminary data for six of the ten schools show that a majority of students are competitive in mathematics and reading, key target areas for the program.

In addition to regular school district testing, the project includes an evaluation by Johns Hopkins. Dr. Clea McNeeley of Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health explains that the evaluation process is advancing through a series of stages. "At first the evaluation component focused on fine tuning the activities of the MGP and the program has been doing this," she said. "This is best practice in terms of evaluation," said Dr. McNeeley. As the evaluation moves forward, it will look at programs and comparisons to like groups. "An outcome evaluation is very difficult without randomization," she said. What is exciting about MGP, they are really taking on the partnership aspect and trying to leverage partnerships to get the desired result, Dr. McNeeley states.

Kristin Mmari, Assistant Scientist at the Bloomberg School has been conducting interviews among students, parents, and staff to collect qualitative data on the project. "It's a phenomenal program," she said. "The program designers have invested a lot into the summer program and it's been life-changing for some of the students."

Kids have found confidence in themselves and they have dreams now, she said. Students have told her "I want to be a biologist or they want to be an (CSI) investigator," Mmari said.

Dr. McNeeley and Dr. Mmari stress the unique aspects of the MGP. "Previous models involving private schools offered a hand out to public schools," said Mmari. "There really is a partnership here and there's a real give and take aspect to this." Both of them emphasized school leadership. "The project has successfully involved all their staff in both the private and public schools," Mmari said. This leads to a real commitment among the participants. In many projects, there's an "us and them" mentality, but the most successful partnerships are saying "we and us". The MGP is working on getting partners onto a true equal plane.

Organizations seeking to enter the education fray should keep in mind that there are many out there who are already engaged; Baltimore's Middle Grades Partnership is one such example. This project is multifaceted and certain aspects of it lend themselves to replication. Urban district areas have non-profits that are knowledgeable about the workings of their schools systems. There are private schools that may or may not be willing to collaborate on improving schools, and the private school/public school partnership model definitely serves as a model. Although there is controversy concerning evaluation, there are postsecondary institutions throughout the nation (also often found in urban areas) that can lend resources to reform efforts. A potential public/private education partnership needn't incorporate all the elements of the MGP to be successful or to have an effect.

Written by Tony Fowler of ToMolly and Friends.

Resource Links

The Middle Grades Partnership
www.middlegradespartnership.org

MGP Blog, maintained by two participating schools
www.mgpsummerscholars.blogspot.com

The Baltimore Community Foundation
www.bcf.org

Morton K. and Jane Blaustein Foundation
www.blaufund.org/foundations/mortonandjane_f.html

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