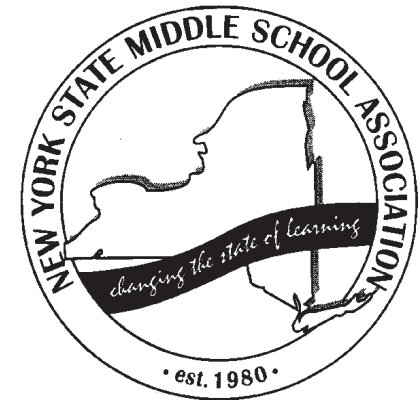


## Philosophy and Mission Resources

- The complete *The Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level Schools and Programs* can be downloaded as a MS Word document at nysmsa.org in the Middle Level Essentials section of that web site.
- *This We Believe*, the position paper of the National Middle School Association, is frequently used as a guide for middle schools. It is available for order from most middle level sources, including the NYSMSA web site.
- Rick DuFour's *Professional Learning Communities at Work* is a great primer for establishing a Learning Community in your school. Naturally, mission and vision come first. This book is published by National Educational Service.
- The seminal book on the importance of mission and vision, in addition to creating learning organizations, is *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge. This is available at any bookstore or book outlet, published by Doubleday Currency.
- *Developing a Mission Statement for a Middle Level School* is a resource from SED that can help. It includes examples from schools. You can download it from nysmsa.org.

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*The Essential Elements of Standards-Focused  
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## **An Introduction to Essential Element 1 Philosophy and Mission**

**Professional Pamphlet  
Series 10 Issue 1  
2004-2005**

**New York State  
Middle School Association**

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# Essential Element 1: Philosophy and Mission

A philosophy and mission that reflect the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents

**W**e are trying to do something that has never been done before! Never have we expected all students to meet the same high standards. So, not only are middle schools charged with assisting students in their transition from childhood to adolescence, we are charged with meeting higher standards of achievement. As a result, our students need academic support and challenge unlike any we've seen before.

High achieving middle schools know that it takes a focus on both academic achievement **and** personal development. These goals are not mutually exclusive; they are completely dependent upon each other!

**H**igh achieving middle schools deliberately build and maintain a vision for their students and their school that reflects an ethos of respect, caring, and support. These schools know that the middle-level grades serve as special places for students — a refuge and a support during a time of dramatic change.

The middle grades must serve multiple purposes. They must continue to emphasize skill development (an elementary concern) while at the same time providing

substantive instruction in specific disciplines (a high school imperative). **And** they also must provide a supportive environment for students who are undergoing a profound life change (a middle-level priority). Developmentally-appropriate middle schools stress the development of the whole child, including his or her self-esteem and sense of personal identity and intellectual challenge and growth. Educators, parents, and all other stakeholders must collaborate to instill in students a sense of positive self-worth, self-respect, and self-confidence, as well as a belief that all can succeed academically.

**W**hat should a middle school do? Schools should work with stakeholders to develop an explicit **philosophy** and **mission** that publicly and purposefully articulate and stress the importance of an intellectual *and* personal focus. This mission should be constructed from an examination of research, best practice, demonstration schools, and community interests. It should serve as the fundamental philosophical foundation for all school improvement efforts. The mission is the public commitment to the students and community. Other decisions about program, structure, and leadership spring from this.

## Developmentally responsive middle-level programs...

- **Reflect shared beliefs of multiple stakeholders**
- **Commit to whole child development — intellectually, academically, personally, socially, physically, emotionally**
- **Include responsibility for the educational and personal development of ALL children**
- **Provide a variety of learning experiences and opportunities to enable them to make informed life decisions**
- **Establish partnerships with home and community**

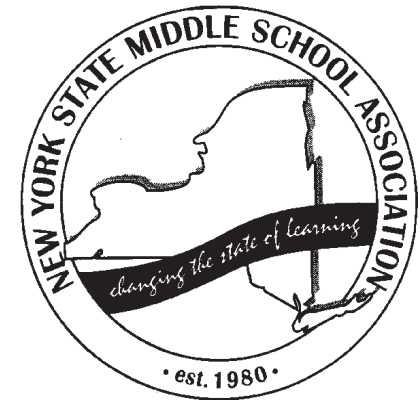
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## Educational Program Resources

- Of course, beginning with the end in mind is part of the well-known and widely embraced *Habits of Highly Effective People*. What Stephen Covey espouses in that book for us personally, holds equally true for us institutionally.
- There is an *Educational Fieldbook* that accompanies Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*. In both, Senge connects beginning with the end in mind, systems thinking, and becoming a learning community.
- Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's must-have book, *Understanding by Design*, opens with a description of the backward design process.
- In the February 2003 edition of *Educational Leadership*, Jay McTighe and Ronald Thomas explain the analogous relationship between Backward Design and School Improvement Planning. The article is called "Backward Design for Forward Action."
- It may seem obvious, but where can one find the 28 Learning Standards for New York state? They are archived at [www.emsc.nysed.gov](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov).

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## **An Introduction to Essential Element 2 Educational Program**

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## Essential Element 2: Educational Program

An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant, and standards-based

There is much talk these days about the need to be focused on the NYS Learning Standards, but what does that really mean? How does one know whether or not a school is standards-based? Why is it important to be standards-focused? And how does one become standards-focused? Let's begin at the end.

Stephen Covey advises us to "Begin with the End in Mind." That is exactly what it means to be standards-focused. It means that a good middle school must deliberately and explicitly outline the *end* for its students, as defined by the NYS Learning Standards. It also means that a good middle school must have an *end* for itself as a purposeful institution, as defined in *The Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level Schools and Programs*. Before emerging or evolving middle schools go too far, it's important to detail just where you want your students to be and where you want to be as a school.

What are the *standards* for a standards-focused middle-level program? There are several sources of information that should inform your school. First, and most obviously, we have the 28 Learning Standards adopted by the NYS Board of Regents. Juxtapose those standards with *The Essen-*

*tial Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level School and Programs*, and you've got a pretty good target. Add local curricula, national standards, and school-based plans and you've got a collection of documents that form the *end* for your school. These are your standards.

Once a school has identified, publicly, its *ends*, consider what it would look like if those ends were being met. What would the evidence be? That's the next step. This parallels the backward design process that Wiggins and McTighe detail; McTighe has actually advised us to think like judges setting out to convict students of understanding. In this case, what would the evidence be to convict a school of being standards-focused? That evidence should be identified up front, before any actual planning of programs and practices occurs in great detail. The target must be clearly identified and agreed upon; arrows aimed at different targets will surely miss.

It is not enough to be standards-referenced, which is where most schools presently are. Standards-referenced means to examine present practices and determine which standards will be hit. That's not the same as being standards-based, and it will likely generate the same results we've always gotten. Standards-based means

honestly examining the *ends* and what that looks like, and then planning the programmatic details. Know where you are going before you set out on your journey.

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### Middle-level programs should...

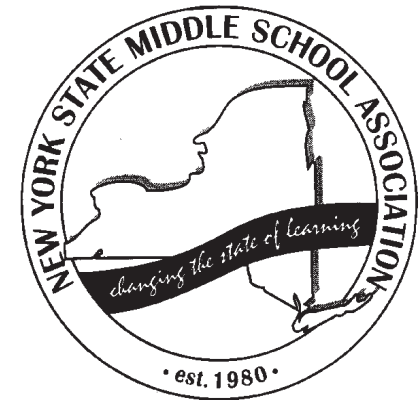
- **Be comprehensive and inclusive, encompassing all of the state's 28 Learning Standards**
- **Be challenging, rigorous, and purposeful**
- **Emphasize interdependence and cross-program connections; promote responsibility**
- **Include an identified common set of learning skills that each child should demonstrate**
- **Be articulated with the elementary feeder schools and with the secondary receiving schools**
- **Have up-to-date, standards-based, written curricula**
- **Engage and involve family and community**

## Organization and Structure Resources

- Download *The Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level Schools and Programs* at [nysmsa.org](http://nysmsa.org), in the site's Middle Level Essentials section. This section also contains several presentations and a tutorial to help teach the Essential Elements.
- *The Exemplary Middle School*, by Paul George and William Alexander, has been the standard text in the field of middle school education for two decades. Its comprehensive coverage remains unparalleled and the authors have included a multitude of rich, real-world illustrations of exemplary middle school practice. This is **the** textbook on middle-level education.
- Elliot Merenbloom's *The Team Process: A Handbook for Teachers* covers all aspects of teams and teaming. It is based on the actual efforts of successful teams and describes procedures to replicate this success. In addition to describing the characteristics of effective middle-level schools and teams, it includes advice about schedules, grouping, conflict resolution, teaching strategies, and evaluation.

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### **An Introduction to Essential Element 3 Organization and Structure**

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## Essential Element 3: Organization and Structure

### An organization and structure that support both academic excellence and personal development

**O**rganization alone does not a middle school make. Without a deliberate and intentional organization and structure, it can be very difficult to realize your vision for a standards-focused middle-level school.

Essential Element 1 tells us that we need a vision for our school that is based on the dual purposes of middle-level programs: academic and personal growth. Essential Element 2 identifies which components we should design into our school. Now it is time to integrate these ideas into a structure that promotes each of the above.

**F**irst and foremost, interdisciplinary teams are a must. Team teachers must share students and, importantly, a common planning time. It is difficult to envision a truly successful middle school without teams. The composition of teams typically includes math, science, social studies, and English language arts. Often, special education teachers are part of a team. Many schools have successfully implemented exploratory teams (the arts, technology, physical education/health, home and career skills, languages other than English) and still other schools have successfully expanded team membership to include exploratory subjects. Effective teams create a sense of belonging for students and work to provide

personal and academic support for all students on the team. In large schools, clusters of teams can be combined to form houses or schools-within-a-school.

The next most critical component is the building schedule. Ideally, decisions about time should be made by teacher teams and not by a bell. Middle-level programs should build in flexible-block schedules in which decisions about time are based on the needs of the students and on the needs of the curriculum.

**T**he list at the right articulates additional characteristics of an effective middle-level organization and structure. It is imperative that these features be designed into the program; they are most effective when they are incorporated into all aspects of the school.

Be sure to deliberately plan for a transition in your program from elementary to high. Make parents an integral part of your school. Ensure that students have opportunities to explore options via clubs, intramurals, extracurricular activities, field trips, service learning, etc. Research shows that varied experiences contribute to a successful school experience. While no single component makes a successful middle school, it is the synthesis of all of these components that provides the richest and most engaging experience for our middle schoolers.

### Developmentally responsive middle-level programs...

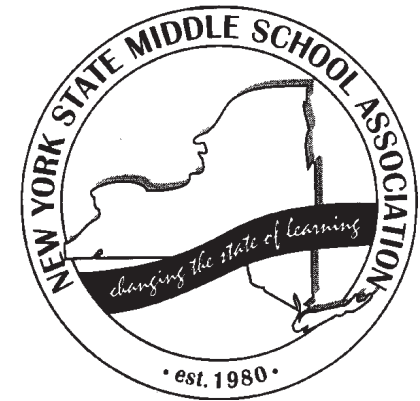
- **Have teacher teams sharing a common group of students**
- **Have common planning time for teachers**
- **Have schedules with flexible blocks**
- **Contain at least three grade levels**
- **Have comparatively small enrollments or have “houses” or schools-within-schools**
- **Are structured to create close, sustained relationships between students and teachers**
- **Provide Academic Intervention Services**
- **Provide a variety of co-curricular and extracurricular activities**
- **Provide opportunities for students to participate in youth service-learning activities**
- **Encourage active parent involvement**
- **Establish ties with the school community**
- **Integrate students with disabilities into the school program**
- **Provide support services to all students**
- **Integrate technology**
- **Provide a gradual transition**

## Classroom Instruction Resources

- Robert Marzano and colleagues at McRel examined what research says are the best instructional strategies to increase student achievement. They are described in *Classroom Instruction that Works*. There is also a handbook that goes along with it that describes practical classroom implementation of the research.
- *How to Meet Standards, Motivate Students, and Still Enjoy Teaching!*, by Barbara Benson, provides a clear perspective on what the standards mean for daily practice. It's a book that describes four practices that help teachers meet the demands of standards-based practice.
- A book that describes effective classroom strategies is *Becoming a Better Teacher: Eight Innovations that Work*, by Giselle Martin-Kniep. This book describes innovations that are worth implementing in all schools, including middle schools.
- Doug Reeves has written many books about standards-focused instruction. One in particular, *Making Standards Work*, succinctly tackles many of the issues and questions that educators ask as they make the transition from standards-referenced to standards-based. It is available from the Center for Performance Assessment.

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### **An Introduction to Essential Element 4 Classroom Instruction**

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## Essential Element 4: Classroom Instruction

Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers

**T**he research on student achievement at the middle level tells us that all of the Essential Elements should be implemented to realize achievement gains. Nonetheless, Essential Element 4: Classroom Instruction may, in fact, be the most important one of them all. It's difficult to imagine a high student achievement without classroom instruction that is challenging, engaging, and purposeful.

We know more about how people learn than we ever did before; this knowledge must inform teacher practice. We know that people learn best when they are actively involved in the construction of meaning. We know that people learn best when they are able to connect new learning to old. We know that learning occurs at the edge of our abilities — that's why expectations must be high and instruction must be rigorous. We know that people learn in different ways and at different speeds, and that's why we must differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students.

**T**he challenge for educators is to seamlessly and logically connect what research tells us about effective instruction and assessment in the classroom. A paradigm shift of sorts is required, too: educators have to become standards-based rather than standards-

referenced. This means we look at instruction from a different perspective. Instead of looking at our lessons and units from the past to see which standards we “hit,” we must begin with the standards and what we want students to understand and be able to do. Once that's been identified, we construct performance assessments and assessment instruments that will tell us whether students are reaching the standards. Finally, we plan learning opportunities that are designed to get students to the standards — learning opportunities that incorporate the ever-expanding pedagogical knowledge base.

To accomplish all of this, teachers must work together; it cannot be done alone. Teachers should collaborate on curriculum mapping, pacing guides, unit plans, assessment strategies, etc. Teachers should also collaboratively look at student work for the purpose of educational decision-making.

**T**here's a great deal that goes into effective classroom instruction. The references in this pamphlet provide practical advice for teachers and administrators. There's more to an effective middle school than great classroom instruction, but it's hard to envision an effective middle school without it. Perhaps effective, standards-based classroom instruction can be considered a prerequisite for the other Essential Elements.

### Developmentally responsive middle-level teachers...

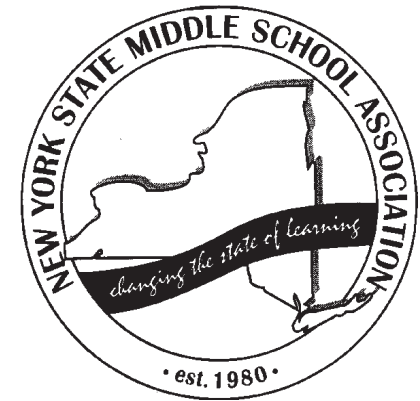
- **Provide instruction that is challenging, rigorous, and purposeful**
- **Understand the needs and developmental characteristics of young adolescents**
- **Have a deep content and pedagogical understanding**
- **Know and understand each of the state's 28 learning standards**
- **Use a range of successful, research-based teaching strategies**
- **Involve students in their learning**
- **Vary activities to maintain student interest**
- **Use technology purposefully to support and enhance learning**
- **Focus instruction on thinking, reasoning, and problem solving and, at the same time, ensure that students acquire necessary content and subject matter**
- **Use interdisciplinary approaches to integrate learning**
- **Use flexible grouping practices**
- **Use classroom assessments effectively and for multiple purposes**
- **Use cooperative learning groups and peer-tutoring opportunities**
- **Consult with each other and with school personnel**
- **Inform and involve parents of middle-level students**
- **Are themselves learners who are constantly engaged in professional growth**
- **Work together cooperatively and collaboratively**

## Educational Leadership Resources

- No collection on leadership is complete without a Michael Fullan resource. In his most recent, *Leading in a Culture of Change*, Fullan identifies and elaborates on the five components of leadership that can affect sustainable change: moral purpose, understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, and coherence making.
- In *Learning by Heart*, Roland Barth hopes to build school faculties of leaders who can transform a school from “ordinary” to “super,” with close attention to the hearts of the students and teachers.
- There is a Power Point presentation on leadership as well as the summary of the *Middle-Level Leaders Statewide Survey* in the Middle Level Essentials section of nysmsa.org. You can also find information in the site’s Middle Level Links section.
- Robert Marzano has set his sights on leadership and what a meta-analysis of the research on leadership tells us. No book is yet available, but an advance summary titled *Balanced Leadership* is available at McRel.org.

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### **An Introduction to Essential Element 5 Educational Leadership**

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## Essential Element 5: Educational Leadership

**Strong educational leadership and a building administration that encourage, facilitate, and sustain involvement, participation, and partnerships**

**J**ust how important is educational leadership? It's crucial, say many studies. While it is difficult to define what constitutes effective leadership, there is some consensus in the field. What is daunting about leadership is how enormous the demands are.

The building principal is generally regarded as the single most influential force in a school. Research indicates that the effective school leader can have a significant impact on student achievement. A good leader who matches her/his leadership to the needs and culture of the school can easily increase student achievement by 10% over a period of just a few years. Conversely, the ineffective leader or the leader whose leadership approach is a mismatch for the school can have a negative impact on student achievement.

**I**n general, the best thinking about leadership suggests that principals should place their emphasis on instructional leadership and on the promotion of a professional learning community within the school. Strong leaders put the interests of the students first at all times. Strong leaders promote positive youth development and strong community involvement in their schools. Strong leaders are visible in the school, especially

in the classroom. Strong leaders lead the professional learning actions of the school and demonstrate their own professional growth. Strong leaders lead.

**T**he best thinking about educational leadership has been rapidly changing. Gone is the principal-as-manager paradigm; principals are now charged with being educational leaders. One problem with this shift is that none of the principal-as-manager responsibilities have been shed to make room for the responsibilities of instruction-based leadership.

This makes it all the more important that the leadership be more than just the building principal. Certainly, the principal is a key leader for any effective middle school. But given the enormity of the demands and the complexity of the changes we are undergoing, leadership must come from all members of a school. The need and opportunities for teacher leaders within a school are considerable. This is one way teachers can contribute to the leadership efforts of the school without having to leave the classroom. Teachers can and should lead or facilitate many aspects of the school, from committees to study groups to in-house professional development.

Strong leadership can greatly impact student achievement, as long as it is stan-

dards-focused, collaborative, and matched to the unique needs of the educational community.

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### **Strong leaders of developmentally responsive middle-level programs...**

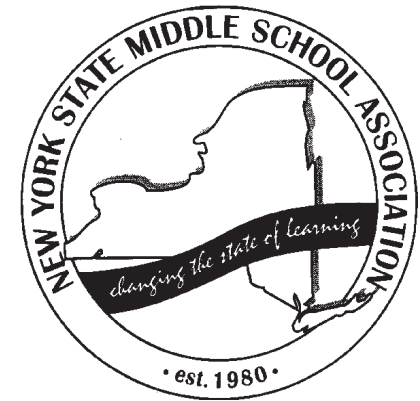
- **Know and understand the needs and characteristics of young adolescents**
- **Know and understand the essential elements of a standards-focused, high performing middle-level school including the 28 learning standards and the state assessment system**
- **Understand the subject matter in the middle grades and its interconnections, different approaches to student learning, and diverse teaching styles (based on research and developmentally appropriate practice)**
- **Involve staff in the operation of the school by encouraging involvement, input, risk-taking, and exploration**
- **Involve and inform parents by fostering an understanding of the developmental needs of adolescents, the learning standards that children must meet, how to assist their children, etc.**

## A Network of Support Resources

- The Search Institute is the one conducting the research on the 40 Developmental Assets — concrete, common-sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to raising successful young people. The development of these assets has the power, during critical adolescent years, to influence choices young people make and help them become caring, responsible adults. You can find a list of the 40 Developmental Assets, the research that supports them, and resources to help you at [searchinstitute.org](http://searchinstitute.org).
- Get inspired and motivated with *Tag, You're It!*, written by Kathleen Kimball-Baker. This handy book, a great resource for every advisor in your school, offers 50 common-sense ways to connect and build assets with young people. Each inspirational idea contains a reference to a supportive research study or expert opinion and includes action items to help you journey toward positive change.
- *Great Places to Learn*, by Neal Starkman et al, offers a practical, pro-active approach to helping students succeed both academically and developmentally. The book shares interesting and encouraging real-life stories and strategies for building asset-rich school communities. Handouts, charts, and action lists give you the tools needed to actively and intentionally build networks of support.

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### **An Introduction to Essential Element 6**

### **A Network of Support**

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## Essential Element 6: A Network of Academic and Personal Support

### A network of academic and personal support available for *all* students

**E**ssential Element 1: Philosophy and Mission tells us that we must be committed to the development of the “whole” child, including the intellectual, academic, personal, social, physical, and emotional needs. Effective middle schools recognize the interdependence of these needs and are dedicated to working to meet them.

There must be a common, agreed-upon commitment to supporting children, but commitment alone won’t get the job done. There must also be an explicit and comprehensive system of supports in place to ensure that the support gets to those who need it. It is imperative that this system be based on current research and best practices.

**A**ll of the in-school support networks (AIS, advisors, teams, counselors, psychologists, etc.) must include communication and collaboration, and they must interface with community support structures and agencies. For this to happen effectively, there must be a deliberate effort made to work together. Turf issues must be put aside to ensure that no student falls through the cracks.

The network of support must be designed so that all students get the sup-

port they need. No one-size-fits-all approach will work. Students with special needs, including students with disabilities, at-risk students, gifted/talented, etc., need additional supports. It is crucial that their education services be seamlessly connected to the overall educational program.

**I**n many schools, a pillar of the system of support for students is a healthy, thriving advisory (advisor-advisee) program. The fundamental premise for advisory is that every single student must have an adult advocate who knows him/her well and advocates for having his/her academic and personal needs met. In the absence of a formal advisory program, effective middle-level schools design alternate systems to meet those needs. Students who feel they belong have a greater likelihood of success. Counseling and guidance services are essential in assisting students and their families in making life, career, and educational choices.

Another pillar of the network of support for students in effective middle schools is a strong, positive youth-development program. Sometimes referred to as character education, positive youth development means making a concerted and continual effort to promote the well-being of the youth in your community. The 40 Developmental Assets are becoming the universal language

for talking about positive youth development. The research on the assets is clear and undeniable: the more Developmental Assets a student has, the more likely he/she will succeed by any measure (school, family, friends, work, wealth, etc.). If you aren’t familiar with the 40 Developmental Assets, take the time to learn about them and incorporate them into your middle-level program (see Resources section on reverse).

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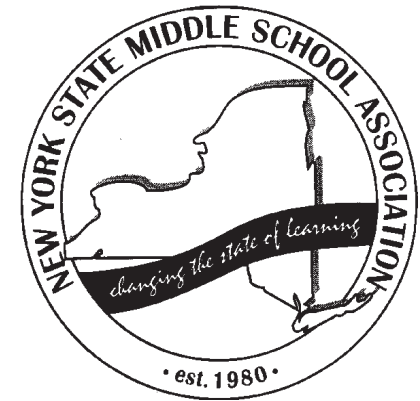
### Within a network of academic and personal support...

- **Adults and older youth provide positive role models**
- **Respect and caring engender a feeling of self-worth, self-confidence**
- **Opportunities arise to discuss and understand the changes associated with early adolescence**
- **Counseling and guidance services assist students in decision-making**
- **Trained professionals and community resources assist those who have special needs or require special services**
- **An adult mentor, formally (advisory program) or informally, assumes responsibility for individual students**

## Professional Learning Resources

- The New York State Middle School Association sponsors a statewide conference each year. The location of the conference varies from year to year. Each conference includes keynote presentations by national middle-level authorities, day-long sessions, social interaction, and dozens of practitioner workshops. The best way to learn about upcoming conferences is by visiting [nysmsa.org](http://nysmsa.org).
- The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) is a professional association dedicated to effective professional learning. Learn more at [nsdc.org](http://nsdc.org).
- Middle-Level Academies are held across New York state each year. Each Middle-Level Academy consists of five or six days of intensive study about the Essential Elements and about the research and best practices that middle schools need to embrace to become successful and effective. Information about upcoming academies can be accessed by contacting NYSMSA's Director of Professional Development. Middle-Level Academies also can be scheduled at your site.

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## Essential Element 7: Professional Learning

Professional learning and staff development for all staff that are ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed

Each of the Essential Elements one through six deals with a specific component of an effective, standards-based middle school. Element seven is uniquely different. In fact, there are some official documents that specifically mention only the first six elements. This is because Essential Element 7 is an integral component of every other element, for the only way schools can successfully plan, implement, evaluate, and maintain an effective program is through ongoing professional learning.

Before even beginning to formalize a proposed plan, the educational community of a middle-level school or program must learn about effective research and best practices for standards-focused middle-level programs. Each of the previous pamphlets in this series can serve as an introduction to these Essential Elements. Actual use of the resources mentioned in each pamphlet will take that introductory knowledge further toward the application level. More must be done with the teachers and staff of a school, though, to make sure a common understanding and vocabulary are in place.

Once this common understanding has been established, necessary professional learning should occur based on an examination of best practices. This will form the

foundation for the implementation stage. Look around for exemplary middle-level schools and programs and go visit them. Look at the State Education Department Web site to find the list of the Middle-Level Support Schools, recognized for their programs. Contact them, and visit. There is no substitute for school visitations.

Perhaps the toughest part comes once implementation has begun. It is important to build a program of professional development and training that is ongoing. The knowledge about how people learn and what constitutes effective pedagogy is expanding; educators must stay current or they will be passed by. This is not an acceptable option for those charged with educating our students in today's standards-based environment. The attitude must be one of continuous improvement with ongoing and embedded staff development.

How can all of the Essential Elements be realized and how can the necessary professional learning occur? There is an answer: as a professional learning community. There is consensus among the best thinkers and researchers in education that schools must act as professional learning communities. It is only through ongoing, meaningful collaboration and hard work that an effective, standards-focused middle school can emerge and be sustained.

### Teachers, administrators, and staff need to...

- **Know the needs and characteristics of students in the middle grades and appropriate instructional strategies**
- **Understand the philosophy and mission of the standards-driven middle school**
- **Be familiar with each of the state's 28 learning standards and incorporate educational experiences that will help students achieve all standards**
- **Know and understand their subject matter and course curriculum**
- **Know and understand the state's assessment system and routinely monitor and evaluate student learning**
- **Collaborate and cooperate in planning and professional training and staff development opportunities**

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