



THE SCHOOLS TO WATCH CRITERIA

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

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards.
2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards.
3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.
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.
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, portfolios, student conferences).
6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards.
7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards.
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.



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

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.
2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.
3. All teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment.

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.
5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems.
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.
7. Students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.
8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.
9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support.
10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment.



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.

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.
2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.
3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.
4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.
5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures.
6. The school community knows every student well.

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.
8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.
9. To the fullest extent possible, staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of their students.
10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.



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.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change.
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.
3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and the opportunity for reflection are the norm.
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.
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.
6. The school staff holds itself accountable for student success.
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.
8. The school staff and district staff partner with colleges and universities.
9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance.



EVIDENCE OF A HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOL

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

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards.

- Expectations are clear for students and parents.
- 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.
- Students revise their work based on meaningful feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard or level.

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.
- Students, teachers and families understand what students are learning and why. In any class and at any time, students can explain the importance of what they are learning.
- The curriculum is rigorous, non-repetitive, and moves forward substantially.
- Work is demanding and steadily progresses.

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.
- Teachers incorporate academic and informational literacy into their course work (i.e., reading, writing, note taking, researching, listening, and speaking).

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
 - direct instruction
 - cooperative learning
 - project-based learning
 - simulations
 - hands-on learning - integrated technology

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, portfolios, student conferences).

- Teachers use common, frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the achievement of their students.
- Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards, expectations, or levels.

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.
- Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning.

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.
- Students have multiple opportunities to succeed and receive extra help as needed, such as:
 - co-teaching or collaborative resource model
 - support and intervention classes
 - before- and after-school tutoring
 - homework centers

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.
- The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement.



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

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.
- These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.
- Every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience.

2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

- Teachers are trained to recognize and handle student problems.
- Students with difficulties, and their families, can get help.
- The school houses a wide range of support (e.g., nurses, counselors, resource teachers) to help students and families.
- School staff members offer parent education activities involving families.

- 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.
 - Teachers incorporate well-developed procedures and routines for effective classroom management.
 - Teachers facilitate learning by deliberately teaching study and organizational skills.
 - Teachers integrate creative activities in the lessons (e.g., current technologies, visual and performing arts, etc.).

- 4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.**
 - Students talk about daily issues in their own lives, their community and their world.
 - Students take action, make informed choices, work collaboratively, and learn to resolve conflicts.

- 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.
 - Students can work on the same project in several different classes.

- 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 push students to challenge themselves and set high academic and career goals for their future.
 - Students are provided with multiple opportunities to explore topics of interest to them.
 - Students demonstrate competency in a variety of subjects as well as areas of interest.

- 7. Students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.**
 - All students have a real say, or have legitimate representation, in what happens at school.
 - School staff members have an “open-door” policy to encourage student involvement and connection.
 - Students take an active role in school-family conferences.

- 8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.**
 - Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers; they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school.
 - Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision-makers in their children’s education.

9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support.

- Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world.
- Members of the community engage in meaningful learning opportunities with the school.

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 cover a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts.
- Co-curricular programs are infused with activities that help students develop relevant life skills.



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.

- 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.
 - Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports.
 - Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid.

- 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.
 - Teachers provide a variety of learning experiences so all students have opportunities to master a challenging curriculum.
 - Teachers provide learning activities that represent varying learning styles so all students have opportunities to master standards.

- 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.
 - Teachers assess mastery continuously and modify their instruction to meet current needs.
 - The master schedule is developed in a way that provides flexibility for teachers to meet specific instructional needs on a daily basis.

- 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.
 - To the fullest extent possible, students with disabilities are in regular classrooms.
 - Students have access to interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities.

- 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.
 - Materials in the media center represent all of the cultures of the students.
 - Families often come and share their traditions and beliefs.
 - Multiple viewpoints are encouraged.

6. The school community knows every student well.

- Each student is appreciated and respected.
- Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways.
- Every student has an adult advocate and supporter in the school.

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.

- Transportation, meals, childcare, and translation support are provided so all families of diverse cultures and languages can attend school events.
- Efforts are made to eliminate barriers (e.g., transportation, childcare, translation) to attend school events.
- Multiple forms of communication are used with families and communication is two way.
- Families have a voice in the decision-making process of the school.
- 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).

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.
- Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors.

9. To the fullest extent possible, staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of their students.

- The school recruits a culturally and linguistically diverse staff.
- The staff members are a good match to the school's community.

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.

- Students and parents are informed of school rules and know exactly what will and does happen if students break the rules.
- 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.
- 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.



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.

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.
- Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose.
- Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions.

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.
- The school leadership team has the responsibility to make things happen.
- The principal makes sure that assignments for the staff are clear and explicit and are completed in a timely manner.

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.
- Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture.
- Learning is on-going for everyone.

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.
- Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e., classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.).
- Opportunities for learning increase knowledge and skills, challenge outmoded beliefs and practices, and provide support in the classroom.

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.
- 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.
- The school and district work collaboratively to bring coherence to curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, data collection, analysis, and accountability for student achievement.

6. The school staff holds itself accountable for student success.

- The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions.
- School-generated evaluation data is used to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement.
- The school staff intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question.

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.
- District and school staff assess and evaluate current programs regularly and adapt them as needed to maximize the level of student mastery.

8. The school staff and district staff partner with colleges and universities.

- A mentoring program for new teachers is in place.
- The principal contacts colleges and universities when hiring new teachers.

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.
- Representatives of all stakeholders are engaged in ongoing and reflective conversation and decision making about governance to promote school improvement.