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## **National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform Middle-Grades Leadership Development (MLD)**

**A. Significance:** The Middle-Grades Leadership Development (MLD) proposal addresses **Priority 1, Improving the Effectiveness of Principals.** It seeks to increase achievement of high-needs, middle-grades students (grades 5-8) through the *development of and equitable access to (Part A)* quality middle-grades principals. Middle-grades education is now recognized as a pivotal time for keeping students on-track for high school graduation and for preparing students to be college and career ready. This grant will focus on increasing the knowledge and competencies of middle-grades principals so they can more effectively lead their schools resulting in students better prepared to succeed in high school and beyond. The grant will work with 12 high-needs schools in Michigan and Kentucky, two of the states in the National Forum’s Schools to Watch (STW) initiative currently operating in 18 states.

The middle-grades represent the last best chance to keep students on the pathway to high school graduation (EdSource, 2010). In *The Forgotten Middle*, ACT researchers conclude that the academic achievement of eighth graders is a better predictor of college and career readiness than *anything* that happens academically in high school (ACT, 2008). Balfanz, Herzog and McIver (2007) found that a sixth grader who exhibits even one of the following indicators has a significantly diminished chance of graduating from high school: a failing grade in reading or math; attendance below 80 percent for the year; and a final “unsatisfactory behavior” mark in at least one class. The middle-grades are, indeed, pivotal for future success. Yet, middle-grades students in high-needs schools do not achieve well.

The principal orchestrates the school enterprise. “Leadership is second only to teaching among the school-related factors that impact student learning” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 5, 2010); and principal leadership is positively associated with learning

climate, “principal leadership is the one mechanism that accounts for overall quality of instruction and student achievement” (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012, p. 644). Principals build their school’s learning climate and capacity through shared leadership and decision making; professional learning communities to enhance staff performance; and shared accountability among all stakeholders. Principal training is generalist in nature without regard to grade-level context. The conventional thinking is once prepared, principals can effectively lead in *any* k-12 setting. In *Operating in the Dark*, the Bush Foundation, however, found that states have shortfalls when it comes to principal preparation (Briggs, Cheney, Davis & Noll, 2013). *A New Vision for the Middle-Grades* (Southern Region Education Board) recommends specific preparation for principals of grades 5-8: “Find and prepare school leaders specifically for the middle-grades who can motivate teachers and students” (SREB, 2011, p. 21). EdSource (2010) identified strong leadership as a critical factor in driving middle-grades school culture for improving student outcomes. Student performance was higher in the study’s 330 California middle-grades schools when principals lead with intensity emphasizing high expectations and appropriate academic interventions, curriculum, and instructions for middle-grades learners.

However, only five states require preparation for leading middle-grades schools (Gaskill, 2002). How does a principal effectively lead without knowledge about, vision for, and preparation in creating the type of middle-grades school culture and learning environment that keeps students engaged, motivated and on-track for graduation? In low-performing middle-grades schools in dysfunctional districts, lack of preparation is further compounded by leader inexperience or frequent leadership turn-over which takes a toll on school culture (Louis & Leithwood, et al, 2010). MLD tackles this preparation gap and is *novel* because it addresses specific principal development for the middle-grades; creates ownership for a culture of

continuous improvement across key stakeholders; builds capacity for sustainability within the school; and lays the foundation for replication to other schools across the country through the National Forum and its network. Accelerating reform within the school-to-school networking model makes this proposal innovative and provides essential findings on how leadership development and network membership work collectively to increase student outcomes.

In a qualitative study of turnaround middle schools in New York City, researchers chronicled the difference between strong middle-grades leaders and those unable to deliver results. It recommended middle-grades principals be trained in strategic goal setting and socio-emotional supports for middle-grades students and recommended cultivating strong leaders for struggling middle schools by establishing a sustained mentorship between successful principals and principals in low-performing schools through inter-school visitations and principal learning groups (Villavicencio & Grayman, 2012). MLD recognizes the role of principal mentorship and incorporates that support within its innovative approach by using network principals as mentors.

MLD uses the basic elements of the California League of Middle Schools' (CLMS) *Leadership Matters* program operating in the Los Angeles United School District as a model and expands upon it to assist both urban and rural schools. *Leadership Matters* prepares and better equips middle-grades leaders with the knowledge, background, and skills to increase student achievement using the Schools to Watch (STW) vision and criteria of high-performing middle-grades schools that produce results (Cook, 2009). School leaders are trained to improve teacher effectiveness; implement school-wide, student-support systems; and develop positive learning environments. Even though *Leadership Matters* is a small-scale effort, it is producing promising results. The 2012 evaluation noted all schools exceeded their Academic Performance Index (API) growth targets and met API growth targets with Hispanic/Latino student groups. All but

one met API target growth with socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Five schools in the project from the beginning averaged a 48-point school-wide API gain from 2007-2011, and most strikingly in the two that have the original principals and leadership team members, the API gains were 86 points and 81 points respectively from 2007-2011, nearly twice the collective gains of the five schools. *Leadership Matters* is a distributed model which cultivates leadership across various stakeholders in the school. This joint productivity buffers the school against the negative effects of principal turnover. The shared buy-in and unity of purpose are important elements for sustainability and capacity development (Talan, 2012). MLD applies collaborative decision-making in its theory of change.

Further, aspects of the Schools to Watch Transformation Network are included in MLD because grant schools are improving achievement through the Forum's interventions. Evaluation results show changes in culture and collaboration; instructional practices; and leadership, essential factors for turning-around student performance (CPRD, 2012, 2013). These indicators are positively associated with student achievement improvements (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Mertens & Flowers, 2004, 2006). In the 2012 analysis (most recent data available) of reading and mathematics scores by grade level by school, the scores reflect a positive overall trajectory. Reading scores moved upward in 33/51 data points and mathematics scores increased in 30/51 data points (See Eligibility, Appendix C & Evidence, Year III Fact Sheet, Appendix D).

With ongoing support through MLD, principals will be able to transform the way their schools do business to increase efficiencies, change operating procedures, and hence improve student outcomes. "Increasing school capacity for tackling change is associated with both the success of reform efforts and increases in student achievement" (Anfara & Mertens, 2012, p. 59; Borko, 2003; Cosner, 2009, Newmann, 2000, Youngs, 2001; Youngs & King, 2002). Capacity

building includes quality leadership; program coherence; professional communities; teacher knowledge, skill and disposition; and technical resources (Anafara & Mertens, 2012). Effective leaders must exhibit learning-centered leadership behaviors such as planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating and monitoring around the school improvement enterprise in order to lead a middle-grades school out of poor performance (Porter, Polikoff, Goldring, Murphy, Elliott, & May, 2010).

Another novel quality of MLD is the use of school-to-school networking. “Networking accelerates the change process and fosters learning by providing a safe environment that encourages innovation as well as critical and supportive feedback, designed to help build long-term capacity for improvements” (Veugelers & O’Hair, 2005, p. 7). A network exemplifies the ultimate level of collaboration where learning never stops and provides a place which fosters “leaders amongst us” and a willingness to risk or try practices that push teachers and administrators to share, test, practice, reflect, reshape and succeed beyond the walls of their school. School reform networks are innovative “learning” systems that encourage joint problem solving; give members a voice in their own learning; afford teachers and leaders the opportunity to label, articulate and share their knowledge; and accelerate change (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Network schools form a “collegial, horizontal way of learning where teachers and principals reflect on their experiences, construct new knowledge, and develop skills and attributes that enhance student achievement” (Veugelers & O’Hair, 2005, p. 212). A network becomes a “knowledge producing activity” in which schools collaborate to enact an organizational model that goes beyond formal and social structures to a design for coordinated, interdependent practice (Peurach & Glazer, 2011). The project connects MLD schools with their state STW network and offers ongoing support positioning MLD for expansion through the

National Forum’s STW network operating in 18 states. *Potential contribution to development and advancement of theory, knowledge and practice:* Louis, Dretzke and Wahlstrom found that “the job of influencing student achievement is far easier in elementary than in secondary settings” (2010, p. 331). MLD is based in the secondary setting of middle-grades schools and as such will create an evidence-based principal/distributed leadership model for supporting improvements in student achievement, school culture, leadership, capacity building, networking, and sustainability. Each area affects a school’s ability to impact academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity.

*Evidence Standard:* The MLD theory of change is grounded in *evidence of promise* from the Wallace Foundation’s final report, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improve Student Learning*, a six-year investigation of leadership in 9 states, 43 districts, and 180 elementary and secondary schools (See Appendix D, Evidence Standard). It is one of the largest in-depth studies of educational leadership in the country. Researchers used multiple methodological approaches, including qualitative and quantitative methods in this correlational study. Additional data from classroom observations and analyses of student achievement on language and mathematics standardized tests were incorporated in the study. Of particular relevance was Part I: *What School Leaders Do to Improve Student Achievement* which included six correlation studies and a synthesis of implications for policy and practice about school leadership. MLD incorporates many of the aspects contained in these studies but customizes the work to the middle grades. One of the key findings from the studies addresses the “one size fits all” approach to leadership development (p. 103):

In their efforts to develop strong programs of instructional and shared leadership, high school principals work at a distinct disadvantage compared with elementary school

principals. One-size-fits-all models of professional development for principals (widespread throughout the United States), are unlikely to work well in complex and difficult high school settings (the same point holds for some larger middle schools).

Rigorous research on middle-grades leadership is limited. A recent study confirmed the efficacy of a survey for addressing middle-grades principal leadership but acknowledged it was a “research tool to examine how antecedents, such as professional development, affect middle school principal practice” (Bickmore, 2011, p.1). It did not investigate those desired practices nor their impact; so MLD will expand research on leadership for grades 5-8. MLD applies and then extends the findings of the comprehensive leadership study to the field of middle-grades education not only to account for the implications for leading larger, complex buildings as noted in the Wallace findings but also to demonstrate and research how specialized preparation for middle-grades leaders contributes to the creation of high-performing middle-grades schools.

The results will inform the field identifying guidelines and parameters for how to effectively and efficiently assist middle-grades principals in their challenging work to best lead for middle-grades results. MLD will create valuable tools such as on-line leadership training modules, professional learning community guidebooks specifically for use in middle-grades schools, reports on the impact of coaching and network school mentoring, and how-to guides for replication and sustainability of middle-grades practices that affect student achievement.

The National Forum is the only middle-grades entity with a network of sufficient size and magnitude to impact practice and scale-up nationally. The Forum consists of 60 national organizations, 18 state STW organizations, and over 350 STW schools. Schools look to the National Forum and STW for answers, information, ideas, and cutting-edge strategies. MLD will assist schools beyond the project by sharing products and lessons learned through its electronic

media. The Forum's reputation is strong: "It's a diverse and committed membership with the will and capacity to develop and undertake efforts, in collaboration with other organizations and individuals, which can continue the process of transformation" (Kronley & Handley, 2003, p. 82-83). The Forum secures and generates funds from multiple sources including private foundations, federal grants, state and local grants, and fees for conferences, training and technical assistance.

*Applicant demonstrates the project will have a positive impact:* MLD contributes needed knowledge on middle-grades principal development; productive use of time and talent; and sustainability which includes distributed leadership, local ownership, and systemic support, all major reasons cited for why schools fail to sustain change (Aladjem & Borman, 2005). MLD sheds light on leadership for high-performing middle-grades schools, linking improvements in the school conditions to academic outcomes, and the factors for understanding how school-wide excellence once attained is sustained over time.

**B. Quality of Project Design:** The *goal* of MLD is to increase student achievement by developing leaders for creating high-performing, middle-grades schools. The STW vision, criteria, and ratings rubric provide the structured framework for meeting the goal and fulfilling the objectives. The objectives include: **1.** Developing distributed leadership to increase capacity of struggling middle-grades schools to engage in continuous improvement and function as professional learning communities; **2.** Training school leadership in collaboration skills to involve all stakeholders in creating a shared mission, vision, and beliefs establishing ownership for school improvement efforts and high expectations for all; **3.** Assisting school leadership in implementing programs, developing practices, and establishing organizational structures consistent with STW criteria for high-performance to remove learning barriers and increase student achievement; **4.** Building collaborative relationships between school leadership and the

district office to support, expand, and enhance the overall work at the schools; and **5.** Engaging the school leadership team in the STW network to exchange ideas, solve problems, and discuss practices which alter school culture, collaborative climate, teacher efficacy, productivity, and leadership capacity for success. Explicit implementation strategies: To achieve the goal and objectives, the project will use strategies including vision-building; on-site coaching and principal mentoring; network-based learning; data analysis; and reflective practice techniques (See Logic Model, Appendix D). In Michigan and Kentucky 12 high-needs schools will form our consortium of schools (See Appendix C). The MI and KY STW state teams will confirm agreements with consortium schools; identify leadership coaches and principal mentors and train them in facilitation and Cognitive Coaching TM, another novel aspect of the grant (See Evidence, Cognitive Coaching TM, Appendix D); secure comparison schools; match project schools with STW network schools; coordinate all state efforts of the grant; and communicate with the other state team leaders and project team. State teams will collaborate with the National Forum and CLMS, developer of the *Leadership Matters*, and will create face-to-face and interactive training modules for the school leadership teams. Modules will focus on topics such as collaboration and communication skills; the four hats (learner, engager, assessor, and director) of leadership; characteristics of young adolescent learning and high-performing schools; protocols for analyzing student work and data; standards-based instruction and assessment; Cognitive Coaching TM; and reflective questioning.

Prior to the start of school in 2014, each MLD school will identify its school leadership team composed of a minimum of six people including the building principal, a district administrator, three teacher leaders, and another school staff member (e.g., counselor, assistant principal, curriculum coordinator, another teacher leader). Next steps will include sharing the National

Forum’s vision of high-performing middle-grades schools; exploring the *STW* School Rating Rubric (Appendix J) and conducting orientation meetings at each school site. Additionally, training experiences will include an overview of the project design and timeline, introductions of the support team, and the launching of a cross-school peer network. Each school will be assigned a leadership coach who will be trained in Cognitive Coaching™ and support the school leadership team at least twice per month and a principal mentor coach who will provide onsite support to the principal at least six times a year. The leadership team will complete a comprehensive, baseline assessment through the *STW* Rating Rubric which measures the domains of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity and organizational support. The leadership coach and principal mentor will use the data and work with the leadership team to craft goals and write a school improvement action plan that outlines concrete next steps, identifies resources, and establishes performance benchmarks as well as targets specific content for building-level professional development.

In Year I, schools will be matched with a mentor school from the state’s *STW* network of high-performing, middle-grades schools. The mentor school will host visits; allow observations; share their strong practices and programs; and serve as a laboratory for learning providing expertise to mentee schools. MLD school leadership teams will have continuous consultation with its leadership coach, principal mentor, network mentor school and state team leader. Using data from the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL ED, a 360 assessment tool), principals will receive feedback to heighten skills for leading change. Each leadership team will have yearly data to review and analyze (e.g., state test scores, student classroom performance, attendance, *STW* Ratings Rubric, Middle-grades Self Study) to guide goal setting and school action planning. With their coach, school leadership teams will plan on-going, job-

embedded professional development based upon needs identified through the data analysis. Actions in Year 2 and 3 will include: 1) assisting schools with goal identification, management and data analysis; 2) increasing productivity through collaborative leadership development; 3) arranging and conducting professional development; 4) coaching with leadership team, principal mentoring and STW network mentor school exchanges; 5) attending the Forum's annual STW annual conference to learn from the country's high-performing, middle-grades schools; 6) producing tools and disseminating materials for schools and dissemination; and 7) continuing evaluation including focus groups. In Years 3 and 4, lessons learned and tools will be shared with the National Forum members and national STW network so non-project schools can use the materials and knowledge for transformation (See Timeline, Appendix J).

**C. Quality of the Management Plan and Personnel:** *The extent to which the management plan articulates key responsibilities and well-defined objectives.* The Forum (grantee) will oversee all the work in addition to performing tasks to bridge all partners using its expertise in administering large, federal grants (2010 i3 \$6 M; 2006 CSR QI \$3.1 M) to ensure that the project stays on task and accomplishes its goals. The Forum will coordinate cross-state training; conduct regular coordination calls; develop or customize electronic learning platforms; host webinars and on-line discussions; create tools for replication; produce annual events for networking; and organize all fiscal and programmatic reporting requirements. The CA STW team will provide guidance and training to MI and KY so *Leadership Matters* can be implemented with fidelity and will assist with VAL ED analysis and product development. The KY and MI teams (See Organizational Chart, Appendix J) will be responsible for executing the school-based work and will coordinate professional development; coaching and principal mentoring; building-to-building mentoring; and leadership development training and support in their state. They will use data from the STW

Rating Rubric, self-study, student achievement scores, and VAL-ED report to monitor progress and adjust efforts. State teams will coordinate all school-level efforts and communicate regularly with the MLD team. The Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) will conduct the independent evaluation, frame the fidelity study, and provide feedback to all schools and project team members in order to assess progress toward the goal and define the impacts of the innovation. All partners have experience in carrying out these roles and meeting grant targets.

The project will use multiple strategies for developing distributed leadership capacity to achieve the **goal of increasing student achievement**. Louis, Dretzke and Wahlstrom's found that "shared leadership, instructional leadership and trust in the principal when considered together are positively related to student learning" (2010, p. 330). Our **objectives and actions include**: 1) **Develop distributed leadership** (100% of schools establish school leadership teams which meet at least twice a month): **Actions-** Leadership coach provides experiences and resources for improving communication, developing trust, examining data, and establishing plans of action. Principal mentor supports principal in instituting a distributed leadership model. Mentor school demonstrates how model is implemented and shows how barriers are overcome, 2) **Improve collaboration skills** (All principals show increase on leadership ratings on VAL ED and frequency of occurrence of collaboration and shared decision-making moves from once a month to 1-2 times a week in at least 9/12 schools as measured by Middle-grades Self Study and STW Rubric annually): **Actions-** Advisors from CA and state MLD staff train schools in the vision of high-performance, middle-grades education and skills for capacity building and culture creation. Leadership coach and principal mentor serve as a sounding board for principals and help to hone skills for communicating (written and oral), sharing and leading effectively, 3) **Implement programs, practices, and organizational supports to increase student achievement**

*(100% of schools initiate at least 3 desirable school and classroom practices as measured on STW Ratings Rubric and show annual improvements on the STW Ratings Rubric):* **Actions-** Coach and leadership team examine data, investigate best practices, and develop a plan of implementation to best meet the school's needs. Mentor schools serve as trainers about practices to implement. Evaluators provide feedback and data to enlighten implementation, 4) ***Build collaborative relationship with district*** *(100% of schools have district involvement in at least 85% of MLD meetings):* **Actions-** District leader is actively involved in MLD training events, advocates for MLD strategic plan, brings leadership team to the decision-making table, and consults with leadership coach to ensure best possible outcomes for the school, and 5) ***Engage schools in STW network*** *(100% of schools communicate and visit at least 4 times a year with mentor schools):* **Actions-** Leadership coach and principal mentor connect school with a mentor school and involve school in network activities and training experiences. The network becomes a laboratory for innovation and source for sustaining progress. MLD schools strive to become a STW and school has avenues for leadership within the network.

The first six months will focus on project planning and preparation. The evaluation plan will start in the spring of 2014. CPRD will obtain human subjects clearance, identify comparison schools and begin collecting base-line data. Years 2 and 3 will have assistance intensify through more cognitive coaching, mentoring, and professional development linked to the school goals and action plan. The final year's tasks at the school/state level will continue with primary emphasis on continued coaching and mentoring within the STW network in order to sustain the distributed leadership and its role in creating high-performing, middle-grades schools; scaling up for replication across other states; disseminating and sharing products; and completing and reporting on the summative evaluation as it relates to the goals and objectives. (See Timeline,

Appendix J). *Extent of demonstrated commitment of key partners to the project's long-term success.* The National Forum, established in 1997, has a track record of managing large, complex work. It unites key stakeholders to “speak with one voice” and work together to advance middle-grades educational reform. Each MLD partner has been a member of the National Forum for at least 8 years showing long-term commitment to making high-performing, middle-grades education a priority across the country. As Forum members, these MLD members have contributed hundreds of volunteer hours to the STW effort in their states and have shown commitment by underwriting Forum participation. The consortium of schools in MLD has expressed a desire to change their operations and infuse the vision and criteria of high-performing, middle-grades education into their school setting. *Adequacy of procedures for ensuring feedback and continuous improvement in the operation of the proposed project.* MLD has multiple procedures for gaining feedback to make the work responsive and flexible to better address its goal and objectives. From coordinating the 2010 i3 development grant across 3 states, the value of project conference calls for discussing progress, presenting implementation challenges, considering problem-solving options, and analyzing project data reports from evaluators and other sources has been learned. Such calls, in addition to in-person meetings, make the work plan more adaptable and agile and provide a mechanism for addressing unanticipated problems or situations. For example, a challenge arose when one of the districts in the 2010 i3 grant decided to close one of the grant schools. The project team used calls to discuss and analyze the situation; and after extended discussions, the team crafted a plan of action that provided wrap-up services at the closing school; included the identification and enlistment of another district school; offered intense “speed training” at the new school; and adapted the data collection process so that the grant would receive useable data. Regular calls

and annual face-to-face meetings will be scheduled and coordinated by the National Forum for monitoring the progress of the grant and for sharing experiences. At the state level, the implementation data provided by the evaluators will be used to ensure continuous improvement in the operation of the grant. Coaches will use the feedback from the yearly STW Rating Rubric and Self Study evaluation to track yearly progress and then to establish annual goals with the school leadership teams while the coaching interactions will be used to determine next steps and for modifying planned interventions. One of the risks associated with MLD is principal turnover and is exactly why a distributed model is being used. *Estimates of number of students and cost of proposed project:* Currently the 12 consortium schools' enrollment totals 4,900 as of August 2013. Using this as a guide, we will reach approximately 9,700 different students including the new students entering these middle-grades schools each year of the grant. The entire budget for services, evaluation, technical assistance and overall management is \$3,450,000 including the 15% match. The project is cost-effective since the Forum and its partners have low overhead, existing infrastructures, and rely on expert teacher leaders and principals in the state STW networks as "close by" consultants or experts. The partners have stable management, leaders experienced in changing school culture, and a strong commitment to sustaining and expanding the work across the country. *Costs are reasonable:* The Forum is engaged in work similar to MLD through the 2010 i3 grant which delivers a broader, whole-school reform approach with deeper interventions in "turn around" schools. Some of the management practices will be used in MLD; therefore, the MLD budget projections are reasonable for the level of work being proposed. MLD tests a middle-grades leadership model that fills the identified void in school leadership preparation creating a cost effective model. MLD will provide specific lessons and data for leading and improving middle-grades schools and offer an evidence-based

framework that can be used to equitably spread quality principal leadership to more schools in need of assistance. It will help the Forum accomplish its mission of making high-performing, middle-grades schools the norm across the country by identifying effective skills and practices to maximize a leader's influence on school culture, climate, and student achievement.

**D. Personnel:** *Deborah Kasak, Ed. D., Principal Investigator and Executive Director, National Forum.* Deborah manages the Forum's \$6M USDE 2010 i3 development grant and previously managed the \$3.1M CSRQI Grant. For the Forum, she assisted with 24 low-performing middle-grades schools through Chicago's Middle-Grades Initiative and was instrumental in the project's success at improving student performance which saw three schools designated as STW. Previously, she provided assistance to 23 high-needs schools through Illinois Turning Points CSR Center and co-developed the Illinois Middle-Grades Network (USDE, 1989 grant) which proved highly implemented middle-grades schools improved academic outcomes, behavioral functioning, and school culture. This study was the first large scale, quantitative middle-grades study ever conducted. *Irvin Howard, Ed. D., California League of Middle Schools (CLMS), Director of Grant Programs.* He manages the federally-funded School Leadership Program STW Leadership Academy in Compton USD; the i3 state service hub for the Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network in Compton USD and Coalinga-Huron JUSD; and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles-funded, Leadership Matters Middle School Pilot in LAUSD. *Frances Salyers, Executive Director, Kentucky Middle School Association (KMSA) and State Director of Kentucky STW.* Fran works with building administrators as schools proceed through the STW application process, in follow-up work and in supporting high-performing schools in maintaining their success. She served as the director of the Kentucky Center for Middle School Academic Achievement for seven years where she

worked to provide middle school specific professional development and established Kentucky's Academy for Less-Experienced Middle-Grades Teachers. The Academy provided support and training for middle-grades teachers with less than five years of teaching experience. In 2011-12, she was a member of the state team that conducted site visits at low-performing high schools conducting assessments and providing guidance for principals charged with turning around schools. *Sherry Lambertson, Executive Director of the Institute for Excellence in Education.*

The Institute is a state recognized School Improvement Grant Service provider. The schools being served by IEE are experiencing significant increases in academic achievement. She has over 20 years of experience in educational reform. Sherry served as an assistant principal at one of the first Schools to Watch in Michigan. In the role, she led school improvement initiative and helped to drive reform in the building through the school improvement process while holding a relentless vision for high quality middle level practices. Sherry serves as co-director of the Michigan Schools to Watch organization. *Nancy Flowers, Assistant Director of Research Programs at the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois.* Nancy has been with CPRD since 1992, and serves as a principal investigator and project director for research and evaluation projects in the areas of middle school reform and after-school programs. Currently, Nancy leads the evaluation of the Forum's current i3 grant. She has extensive expertise in large-scale data collection (over 1,000 schools), mixed-methods evaluation designs, analysis of student outcome data, and the dissemination of results to improve practice, support data-based decision making, and impact policy. She has written over thirty scholarly publications, reports, and presentations.

**E. Quality of Evaluation:** The Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois will serve as the independent evaluator for the project. CPRD has served

as an evaluator for numerous regional and national middle school reform initiatives. Currently CPRD is conducting the evaluation of the Forum’s i3 Schools to Watch Transformation Network grant. CPRD has a long history of high-quality evaluations and its prior research results on its *School Improvement Self-Study*, a data collection system of survey measures designed specifically for middle-grades schools, have been widely disseminated (Flowers & Mertens, 2003; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003, 2005; Mertens & Flowers, 2003, 2004, 2006; Mertens, Flowers, Hesson-McInnis, & Bishop, 2006, 2007; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2001, 2002, 2005; Mulhall, Flowers, & Mertens, 2002, 2004).

The evaluation is guided by the MLD logic model (Appendix D). Put schematically, the evaluation team hypothesizes that schools engaged in MLD will follow this theory of change:



Through participation in MLD, the leadership skills of the principal will increase; which in turn will increase the organizational capacity of the school to create and implement a vision for high performance; which in turn positively impacts school influences such as culture and climate, collaboration, teaching efficacy, and engaging instructional practices; which ultimately improves student learning outcomes.

The objectives of the evaluation are to (a) conduct a formative evaluation to inform and refine the project intervention, (b) conduct a fidelity assessment of the degree to which the project is implemented as designed at each school, and (c) conduct a summative evaluation to measure the impact of the project on student achievement. To that end, the evaluation team will employ a robust quasi-experimental design (QED) with matched comparison schools, per the What Works Clearinghouse standards of evidence (What Works Clearinghouse, 2011). It will demonstrate that the intervention schools and the comparison schools are equivalent at baseline

on observable characteristics, such as location, enrollment, demographics of students, and achievement scores. Evaluation components will include mixed methodologies consisting of data collected via Vanderbilt's *Assessment of Leadership in Education*, the Forum's *STW Rating Rubric*, CPRD's *School Improvement Self-Study Teacher Survey*, focus groups with leadership teams, coach's activity logs, and student standardized test data. Additionally, a fidelity assessment will be conducted to measure the extent to which the project is being implemented as intended. Although the whole school will serve as the unit of analysis, individual level student achievement data will be used in the impact analyses to ensure statistical power and to account for nesting at an aggregate level.

The evaluation will include 24 middle-grades schools in Kentucky and Michigan (6 project schools and 6 comparison schools per state). This will generate a large sample of approximately 17,000 students (9,000 project and 8,000 comparison), 600 teachers (300 project and 300 comparison), and 24 principals (12 project and 12 comparison). The sample of project schools will be selected using detailed criteria that each school must meet in order to be considered for inclusion in the project, including: 1) Public school; 2) Middle-grades school with a grade configuration of at least 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>; 3) Serve high-need student populations (e.g., students at risk of educational failure, such as students who are living in poverty, who are English language learners, who are far below grade level); and 4) Suppressed achievement scores. The criteria will be used to identify a pool of eligible schools and recruit their participation. It is considered a convenience sample with well-defined criteria (See Appendix C).

The comparison sample will be selected from the same pool of eligible schools used to select the project schools. The matching will be conducted at the school level within each state from the pool of eligible schools. Schools will be matched on the following variables: state, district,

enrollment, student demographics, achievement test scores, and NCLB AYP status and history. When possible, matches will be made within the same district as project schools. Schools will be matched first on achievement test scores and second on NCLB AYP status and history, allowing a 5% margin of difference. Then schools will be matched on the remaining variables in the list above, allowing a 10% margin of difference. The schools in the comparison group will participate in the same data collection components as project schools (except for focus groups) and receive data feedback reports, but they will not receive any of the project intervention services. While it is understood that the data collection and reporting may constitute a mini-intervention unto itself for comparison schools, it is consistent with common practices in schools continually failing AYP, and as such can be considered business as usual. It is being done as a means of improving comparison school participation in data collection and reducing attrition. While this means that the project schools are not being compared with a true no-intervention counterfactual, this is considered to be a minimally invasive treatment counterfactual. The benefits of collecting the same data at project and comparison schools is that it will ensure the impact analyses will not only show if the intervention works, but how it works, and why.

The formative evaluation (See Evaluation Schedule, Appendix J) will use two process measurement tools for assessing the adoption of leadership skills and the organizational capacity of the school to create and implement a vision for high performance. First, Vanderbilt's *Assessment of Leadership in Education* (VAL-ED), a research-based evaluation tool, will be administered in years 1, 3, and 4 at project schools and comparison schools to measure the leadership skills of the principal on behaviors known to influence teacher performance and student learning (Porter, Polikoff, Goldring, Murphy, Elliott, & May, 2010a). VAL-ED is a 360<sup>0</sup> assessment that is taken by the principal, teachers, and the principal's supervisor, and has been

validated in prior research (Porter, et. al., 2010a, 2010b; Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007). VAL-ED data reports will be provided to schools after each administration. Second, the Forum's *STW Rating Rubric* will be administered annually at project schools and comparison schools to assess organizational capacity of the school to create and implement a vision for high performance via levels of the criteria associated with the four key components of the STW Program (academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures). STW rubric data reports will also be provided to schools after each administration.

Intermediate outcomes related to school influences will be measured by CPRD's *School Improvement Self-Study Teacher Survey*, which will be administered in year 1 and year 4 at project schools and comparison schools. Data on school influences such as school climate, culture of collaboration, instructional practices, shared decision making, and teacher efficacy will be assessed with the teacher survey. These data will provide formative feedback in year 1 of the project as baseline levels are assessed. The *School Improvement Self-Study Teacher Survey* has been demonstrated in prior research to be correlated with increases in student achievement (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Mertens & Flowers, 2004, 2006).

The qualitative work, focus groups with school leadership teams, will occur every other year with a sample of project schools beginning in Year 2. The purpose of the focus groups is to provide formative results regarding the experiences of implementation and to assess the multi-layered system of support (e.g., STW leadership coaches, principal mentors, district support) related to leadership development. In addition to capturing process information on coaching through the focus groups, coaching activities will also be tracked at project schools using an online coach's activity log and reporting system. All coaching activities, including mentoring, meetings, professional development, visits to STW schools, and networking experiences will be

documented in this system. The purpose of each activity, the topics addressed, the number and types of staff present, decisions made, and barriers encountered will be collected as part of the log. All qualitative data will be analyzed using an inductive, constant-comparative method to identify categories for coding and common themes (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2006).

The evaluation will also include a fidelity assessment that measures whether the project is being implemented as designed at each project school. By collecting high-quality implementation information, it will enable analyses to account for the level of implementation when assessing impact, and ensure that we can show the intervention was implemented as intended (What Works Clearinghouse, 2011). Using the logic model, a measurement tool to track fidelity of implementation will be developed. The key project components will be identified and an operational definition for each developed. A fidelity threshold for each component will be identified so that an assessment of levels can be made (high, medium, low). A composite score will then be calculated based on the individual component scores and weighted as necessary. The fidelity assessment will be completed every year and reported to the project team so they can ensure that project implementation is on track.

The summative evaluation will use student-level standardized achievement test data for assessing the impact of the project on student learning, the long-term outcome, at project versus comparison schools. Student performance on annual statewide assessments of mathematics and reading/English achievement will be collected every year from project schools and comparison schools. In Kentucky, the Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (K-PREP) test data will be used. The Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test data will be used in Michigan. Using individual level achievement data maximizes statistical power and

accounts for nesting at an aggregate level, thus enabling us to examine important factors in the underlying distribution to allow meaningful inferences about the data to be made.

The data analysis plan for assessing the impact of the project will use a hierarchical linear model (HLM) approach, testing the intervention over three years, by tracking a cohort of students beginning in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and comparing their outcomes to a cohort at comparison schools. Student level baseline equivalence will be assessed using prior year fifth grade achievement data and non-cohort sixth grade school-level data for school level baseline equivalence in order to ensure that the project sample and comparison sample are alike. The importance of demonstrating equivalence of the two groups is recognized in order to minimize potential bias from selection that can alter effect size estimates (What Works Clearinghouse, 2011). It is anticipated that the reported differences on achievement to be less than .25 of a standard deviation. Additionally, the plan will measure differences in rates of attrition for the project schools and comparison schools at initial equivalence testing and throughout the project to ensure that overall and differential attrition do not contribute to the potential bias of the estimated effect, using the What Works Clearinghouse recommendation that an acceptable level of bias is defined as an effect size of .05 of a standard deviation or less on the outcome (What Works Clearinghouse, 2011).

The confirmatory *research questions* guiding the impact analyses are:

1. Does the MLD project intervention significantly improve student mathematics and reading achievement after three years of exposure, as compared to comparison schools?
2. Does the MLD project intervention improve principal leadership practices, which thus improves, organizational capacity, which thus improves school influences, and that it is

this improvement in school influences which improves student achievement, to a significantly greater extent than in comparison schools?

Research question one will examine the overall intervention effect between the project and comparison schools in eighth grade, accounting for where the students started (sixth grade baseline). This model will not directly assess the relationship of principal leadership, organizational capacity, or school influences on the outcomes, but allow a basic assessment of the overall intervention effect. In order to estimate the intervention effect for research question one, we will use a HLM without the mediated effects and use a covariate for change cross-sectional design. The baseline student achievement score will be utilized as a covariate in the model in order to establish the referent intercept, and thus any positive significant coefficient for the student's achievement in their eighth grade year will reflect significant change over baseline. The treatment/control indicator variable will tell us if the intervention caused a differential effect between project and comparison schools.

Research question two will add the assessment of the mediated effect of principal leadership, organizational capacity, and school influences, and its subsequent impact on student achievement. Since the theory of change posits an indirect relationship between the intervention and student achievement, the study intends to establish that the relationship between the intervention and overall outcome impact is a result of a mediated indirect effect. Therefore, the second model will seek to experimentally test whether the intervention leads to a significant improvement in the VAL-ED assessment (reflecting an improvement in principal leadership), that this is significantly associated with an improvement in the Self-Study Teacher Survey measures (school influences), and that this is significantly associated with student achievement, accounting for the variation in organization capacity. Organizational capacity (as measured by

the STW Rating Rubric) is being treated as a covariate because the model will lack adequate power to detect this indirect effect. The second research question will use a similar two-level HLM with the addition of fitting a lower level mediation effect utilizing the approach outlined by Bauer, Preacher, and Gil (2006). The *What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook* (2011) makes it clear that researchers must show evidence that impact effects are attributable solely to the intervention; this mediation model will assist in understanding the role the process of this intervention has on student achievement.

The evaluation team will share the results of the evaluation analyses broadly. School-level and aggregate-level reports of formative and summative data will be provided annually to project schools, coaches, the Forum, and state teams so they can use it to monitor and refine program implementation, and to comparison schools as a benefit of their participation. In addition, aggregate reports of coach's log data and focus group results will also be distributed. The evaluation team is experienced at working in a collaborative partnership that provides data to participating schools for data-based decision making and program improvement (Flowers & Carpenter, 2009; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2007). At a broader level, aggregate results and lessons learned will be shared with the Forum membership.

The evaluation team will collaborate with USDE evaluators in overall meta-evaluation activities for i3 grantees. Additionally, the evaluation team will participate in technical assistance activities provided by USDE for project evaluators, including regular phone calls, submissions of evaluation designs, and sharing of results. The evaluation and project teams will also engage in networking opportunities with the broader community of i3 grantees via national meetings to share lessons learned, barriers, and project results.