



## Mid South Middle Start School Reform Initiative Boosts Student Achievement in Arkansas Middle-Grade Schools

### University of Illinois study shows gains in achievement, teaming and classroom practices, and student behavior

A longitudinal study by the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois finds that seven Arkansas middle-grade schools involved in the Mid South Middle Start school reform initiative, sponsored by the **Foundation for the Mid South (FMS)**, made progress in several areas of school improvement. Analysis of statewide academic achievement data reveals that Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools outpaced a matched, control group of schools and a state comparison group of schools:

	Percent Passing at Proficient or Advanced <sup>1</sup>			
	2001	2002	2003	Gain
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Literacy</b>				
Mid South Middle Start schools <sup>2</sup>	22.3	24.7	37.2	14.9
Control group schools <sup>3</sup>	21.0	22.7	32.0	11.0
State comparison group schools <sup>4</sup>	30.9	28.9	39.2	8.3
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Math</b>				
Mid South Middle Start schools <sup>2</sup>	11.5	12.5	14.7	3.2
Control group schools	8.3	13.2	10.5	2.2
State comparison group schools	15.7	15.6	17.8	2.1

<sup>1</sup> As measured by the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment, and Accountability Program (ACTAAP).

<sup>2</sup> Data is for 6 of the 7 Mid South Middle Start schools; 1 school does not have an 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>3</sup> Control group schools (6 schools) were matched to Mid South Middle Start schools based on several factors, including the percentage of students receiving free/reduced-priced lunch (an average of 70%), the location of the school, grade configuration, and school enrollment.

<sup>4</sup> State comparison group schools (126 schools) are Arkansas public schools with comparable percentages of free/reduced-priced lunch students to Mid South Middle Start schools (70%).

#### Key findings:

- Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools show larger gains in literacy and math achievement scores from 2001 to 2003 than the matched, control group of schools.
- Compared to a state comparison group of schools with the same percentage of free/reduced-priced lunch students, Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools show larger gains in literacy and math achievement.
- Although Mid South Middle Start schools have slightly lower achievement scores than the state comparison group in both 2001 and 2003, their gains in achievement have begun to close the gap in scores by 2003.
- Research has demonstrated that increases in academic achievement are not usually measurable until 4-5 years after implementation of comprehensive school reform programs. The progress of the Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools is, therefore, encouraging and further progress remains likely.

#### Mid South Middle Start Initiative

The Mid South Middle Start Initiative is a component of FMS's Educational program area. The purpose of Middle Start is to help build and foster a regional movement to improve middle-level education in the Mid South. It seeks to accomplish this through building the capacity of schools to restructure their campus following a research-based middle level model of educational reform. Middle Start seeks to make the Mid South a region that is characterized by high-performing middle schools for young

adolescents that are developmentally responsive, academically excellent, and socially equitable. It assists schools in accomplishing six goals related to practice, policy, and public support:

- To improve academic outcomes;
- To encourage changes in policies and practices;
- To build capacity within the region;
- To improve curriculum and instruction;
- To increase public awareness, and
- To foster schools' collaboration with the private sector and community agencies.

### Arkansas Mid South Middle Start Schools

A major focus of Mid South Middle Start is to use the ongoing collection of school data to guide improvement efforts. All schools complete the School Improvement Self-Study Surveys, conducted by CPRD, for planning and monitoring school improvement efforts. The surveys of administrators, teachers, and students measure levels of practices, attitudes, and behaviors related to school reform.

CPRD analyzed Self-Study data collected from the seven Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools over the course of two rounds of data collection. Data was collected in 2001 and in 2003. Four of the Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools received comprehensive school improvement grants from FMS to implement Middle Start over a three-year period. The remaining three schools received focused professional development grants from FMS to support their improvement efforts.

The Self-Study data from the seven Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools was compared to the Self-Study data from the matched, control group of seven schools in order to examine the level of best practices and change.

#### Mid South Middle Start Partnership

Mid South Middle Start is a middle-grades reform initiative undertaken by the Foundation for the Mid South, with the support of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and in collaboration with the Academy for Educational Development, the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois, and school and other educational organizations in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The Mid South Middle Start Partnership guides and supports schools in the following areas:

- Orientation to Middle Start.
- Administration and review of the school Self-Study.
- Assistance in creating, implementing, and refining a school improvement action plan.
- Assistance in selecting professional development.
- Leadership development and networking.
- Statewide networking.
- Coordination, support, research, and management.

### Interdisciplinary Teaming

Research supports the positive impact that interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time can have on middle-grades students. Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools and the control group schools have similar levels of teaming in 2001 and 2003. Among both groups, 43 percent (3 of the 7 schools) have implemented teaming with common planning time. As a result of their teaming implementation, both groups show gains in “best” teaming practices (such as *planning and coordination of team activities*, *curriculum integration practices*, and *coordination of student assignments*) from 2001 to 2003.

### Classroom Practices

Research demonstrates that schools that are teaming effectively are better equipped to implement “best” instructional practices and core content skills at a higher frequency. Compared to the control group schools, Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools show gains in best instructional practices.

- Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools show gains from 2001 to 2003 in how often they are implementing the following four best instructional practices: *small group active instruction*, *critical thinking practices*, *reading skill practices*, and *writing skill practices*.
- The control group schools show gains in only one instructional practice and no change or declines in five others.

### Student Behavior

Arkansas Mid South Middle Start student behavior scores improved from 2001 to 2003. Middle Start students report lower *behavior problems* in 2003 than they did in 2001. Control group schools also show improvement in *behavior problems*, but at a lower rate than the Arkansas Mid South Middle Start schools.

**For more information about Mid South Middle Start, please contact:**



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