



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

University of Illinois study shows gains in achievement, teaming and classroom practices, and student well-being

A longitudinal study by the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois finds that seven Louisiana 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 Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools outpaced a matched, control group of schools:

| | Percent Passing at Proficient or Advanced ¹ | | | |
|---|--|------|------|------|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | Gain |
| 8th Grade Language Arts | | | | |
| Mid South Middle Start schools | 10.1 | 15.1 | 11.4 | 1.3 |
| Control group ² schools | 13.4 | 12.0 | 9.7 | -3.7 |
| 8th Grade Math | | | | |
| Mid South Middle Start schools | 2.0 | 4.0 | 3.1 | 1.1 |
| Control group schools | 5.9 | 2.2 | 5.0 | -0.9 |
| 8th Grade Science | | | | |
| Mid South Middle Start schools | 8.3 | 13.7 | 13.7 | 5.4 |
| Control group schools | 12.6 | 8.5 | 7.7 | -4.9 |

¹ As measured by the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP 21).

² Control group schools (7 schools) were matched to Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools based on several factors, including the percentage of students receiving free/reduced-priced lunch (an average of 73%), the location of the school, grade configuration, and school enrollment.

Key findings:

- Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools show gains in language arts, math, and science achievement scores from 2001 to 2003. The control group schools, on the other hand, show decreases in achievement scores.
- Compared to control group schools, Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools had lower language arts and science achievement scores in 2001, but made gains so that by 2003, their scores are higher. In math, Middle Start schools show a net gain from 2001 to 2003, but remain slightly lower than the control group schools.
- Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools follow the statewide achievement trends for language arts and science. For all three subjects, Middle Start schools show larger gains than the state.
- 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 Louisiana 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.

Louisiana 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 Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools over the course of three years. Baseline data was collected in 1999 and the final year of data was collected in 2003. Two of the Mid South Middle Start schools received comprehensive school improvement grants from FMS to implement Middle Start over a three-year period. The remaining five schools received focused professional development grants from FMS to support their improvement efforts.

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

Interdisciplinary Teaming

Research supports the positive impact that interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time can have on middle-grades students. In 1999, none of the Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools were

teaming, and only one control group school was teaming. By 2003, 58 percent (4 of the 7 schools) in both the Middle Start group and the control group had implemented teaming with common planning time, resulting in gains in “best” teaming practices for both groups. Compared to the control group, however, Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools:

- show larger gains from 1999 to 2003 in how often teams are engaged in best team practices (such as *planning and coordination of team activities* and *curriculum integration practices*).
- are engaged in *curriculum integration practices* more often (between several times a year and quarterly).

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, Louisiana Mid South Middle Start schools:

- show larger gains from 1999 to 2003 in how often they are implementing all best instructional practices (such as *authentic instruction and assessment and small group active instruction*), whereas, the control group shows gains in only three practices and no change or declines in seven others.
- have the highest gains in the instructional practices of *small group instruction, integration and interdisciplinary practices, and writing skill practices*.
- are most often (almost weekly) using the instructional practices of *small group active instruction and mathematical skill practices*.

Student Well-Being

Louisiana Mid South Middle Start student well-being scores improved significantly from 1999 to 2003. Middle Start students have higher *self-esteem*, higher *academic efficacy*, and lower *behavior problems* by 2003. Control group schools show improvement only in *behavior problems*. While Middle Start students’ *self-esteem* and *behavior problems* are comparable to the control group in 2003, their *academic efficacy* is significantly better.

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.

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