



A National Policy Agenda for the Middle Grades

For AMLE Membership



The Association for Middle Level Education

A NATIONAL POLICY AGENDA FOR THE MIDDLE GRADES

With a growing body of science emphasizing the profound and consequential nature of early adolescence, now is the time to act on the promise of the middle school years.

All 10–15 year olds deserve schools that help them become competent and confident individuals who feel a sense of agency, are proud of who they are, are optimistic about their future, feel connected to those around them, and are prepared to succeed in our ever-changing world. Yet as a nation we invest fewer dollars in the middle years than on any other age group. While federal spending in the periods from birth through fifth grade and in post-secondary education amounts to \$36 billion and \$34 billion respectively, spending for middle school clocks in at only \$6 billion.

For too long, the middle grades have been racked by a mistaken narrative that this age group is simply too difficult, or that it's a time in life when one must simply endure rather than thrive. AMLE rejects that narrative. It's time to shift the story of middle school, instead, to one of profound opportunity that simply can't be ignored. The stakes are high for middle schoolers as their personal development and academic growth during these years can dramatically impact their futures. Creating successful middle schools, then, is crucial for both individuals and society at large. In short, it is time for a unified policy agenda in support of the middle grades.

This *Policy Agenda* reflects a future-focused set of recommendations that will move our education system toward one in which all students can thrive and positioning all students for success in later life. Accomplishing these aims will provide federal recognition for the middle grades as a distinct educational phase, support a diverse, professional workforce equipped to meet the unique developmental needs of this age group, advance promising, research-based practices that could be replicated across the country, and open new opportunities for middle schoolers to explore their future possibilities when it matters most. Finally, it will address the acute, ongoing mental health crisis, supporting students with essential supports and resources.

These goals are embodied in these aspirational federal policy recommendations, representing a first step in a long-term commitment to advancing structural changes in the ways our nation, both in and out of school, addresses the developmental and educational needs of young adolescents. The Policy Agenda is designed to create the foundation of a unified voice for middle level education that can be expanded on and will include collaborative work at the state and local level. It is also rooted in decades of research about this age group and AMLE's core value that all young adolescents deserve an education that is responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging. Most importantly, it brings to life the voices of middle schoolers who themselves affirm the critical nature of this time in their lives and the desire to learn in schools designed for and dedicated to their success.

Being a middle schooler can also be like riding a rollercoaster — blindfolded. You can't predict the twists and the turns that could happen.

Teachers, though, stay by a student's side, making sure that student has someone in their corner at all times. They make navigating the rapids of middle school so much easier.

Madison, Grade 8

Being a middle schooler in today's day and age comes with its ups and downs but you have to find the people, adults and peers, who are really going to be there for you throughout the whole thing.

Laila, Grade 7

Middle school is a great time to learn new things and grow as a person. Middle school can also be a challenging time, but it is important to remember that everyone is going through the same thing. With the support of friends, family, and teachers, middle school can be a positive and rewarding experience.

Dionne, Grade 6

FEDERAL PRIORITIES

AMLE, bolstered by its community of 35,000 educator members, intends to advocate for the following federal policy priorities in 2024. These priorities were selected based on input from across our membership community, collaborating and partner organizations, and from middle school students themselves. Each represents an area where AMLE is uniquely positioned to lead or support advocacy efforts that would have a consequential and positive impact on young adolescents. While not exhaustive of the many issues that are important to our membership, these policies are particularly actionable at the federal level so would have national impact and we believe that with a long-term commitment these policy priorities are both ambitious and achievable.

This advocacy work is one component of AMLE's multi-pronged strategy to advance middle level education that also includes providing direct support and training to schools through the Successful Middle School Program, advancing research and best practices through our journals, publications, and the Successful Middle School Research Project, and promoting promising practices through our committees and conferences.



1. GAIN FEDERAL RECOGNITION

Create an office at the U.S. Department of Education (USED) that is dedicated to elevating the middle grades and promoting an education for young adolescents that is responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging.

The Opportunity: There is not currently staff at USED that is dedicated to ensuring the success of middle school students and educators. This office would help to ensure the needs and strengths of middle level educators have a seat at the federal policymaking table, and that efforts of the USED are responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents. AMLE members are consistently seeking resources and support for instruction specific to young adolescents, and this office would be dedicated to that purpose.



2. EXPAND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDING

Amend Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Act to name teacher and school leader professional development for those teaching or leading in middle grades as an allowable use of funds, including preparation on young adolescent development.

The Opportunity: Professional development is vital to the success of middle level educators, but federal law doesn't currently name this as a potential use of federal professional development funds. Further models for professional development would bolster the preparation to which educators and leaders already dedicate themselves. Creating this mechanism to support teachers would be especially important in expanding the understanding of how to best meet the needs of young adolescents.



3. GROW THE EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Incentivize the diversification and growth of the middle grades educator workforce by ensuring that federal grants under Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA) include a focus on preparing teachers and school leaders to serve in the middle grades.

The Opportunity: Following the pandemic, there is an increased need to support educator retention and develop pipelines for diverse educators. This is particularly important since research shows that students benefit from educator diversification and representation. Adding a focus on middle level educators to the HEA would allow for additional federal attention to the importance of this developmental stage.



4. ADDRESS THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Support federal efforts to address the mental health crisis in young adolescents, which could include providing mental health services in schools, hiring of school support staff such as advisors and counselors, and research to determine leading causes and indicators.

The Opportunity: Research over the past few years has brought national attention to the mental health crisis in students, and especially young adolescents. AMLE educators have indicated the overwhelming nature of supporting students as they recover from the pandemic. AMLE will join others advocating for more counselors in schools, more community-based schools, more access to Medicaid for student services, and other federal policies that would make mental health services more available to middle level students.



5. SUPPORT INNOVATION

Establish middle grades innovation and improvement grants that specifically fund districts proposing to develop new or scale existing evidence-based approaches to responsive educational practices for young adolescents that improve learning and development in middle grades, particularly for students in schools in need of comprehensive or targeted support and improvement. This might include, but not be limited to, a carve out within the existing USED Education Innovation and Research Program.

The Opportunity: Innovation grants often use new approaches to instruction built on evidence or educational technology to address the needs of certain student populations, but middle grades and the unique development of this group of students are not a focus. AMLE educators work to make sure they are implementing new and evidence-based techniques, but more knowledge is necessary to support them.



6. EXPAND CAREER EXPLORATION OPPORTUNITIES

Provide more developmentally appropriate opportunities for young adolescents to explore a wide range of careers and develop 21st century skills. These may include, but not be limited to, expanding the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) to allow uses of funds in the middle grades (currently starts at age 14) and directing an amount of each state's Perkins funds to serve middle grades explicitly in Career and Technical Education (CTE).

The Opportunity: The Institute for Education Sciences (IES) has only one project that is dedicated to the outcomes of middle-level students. Educators, and especially AMLE members, are constantly evolving their practices to meet student needs, and additional research has the potential to significantly impact student learning during young adolescence, a pivotal stage in youth development. As Congress considers reauthorization of ESRA, the needs of young adolescents should be considered as a unique group in need of further research.



7. INCREASE RESEARCH FUNDING

Increase funding for research on the middle grades and young adolescent development including by advocating to include this focus in the reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) as a requirement of the Institute of Education Sciences.

The Opportunity: Currently, middle-level students have few to no opportunities to explore career opportunities that might enhance their motivation, engage them in their own decision making, and prepare them for success. The expansion of federal funds to be used in the middle grades would provide access to resources for this purpose and remove a barrier for collaboration (since currently partners using WIOA funds do not partner with middle schools for example). This might include supporting state-based standards around exploration, such as the Illinois PaCE Framework.

Will you help flip the narrative of middle school?

As the oldest and largest organization of its kind, AMLE and its community of members 35,000 strong is uniquely positioned to lead this work. To accomplish these ambitious goals, AMLE seeks the support of educators, district and state education leaders, along with policy makers who recognize the opportunity of the middle grades. Together, we can flip the narrative of the middle grades to recognize our students' full potential.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN TAKE ACTION:

BE INFORMED

Sign up for the AMLE's new Advocacy Updates Newsletter and explore the AMLE Advocacy Toolkit and follow AMLE and #FlipTheNarrative on social media.

BE ACTIVE

Apply for a position on AMLE's Advocacy Constituent Committee that will help guide and support our work to advance the aims of the *Policy Agenda*.

BE VOCAL

Share your middle level education story to help us flip the middle school narrative. Or, build relationships and share talking points with your district, local, and state leaders. Help us create networks of stakeholders who share our vision for the middle grades.

BE AN AMBASSADOR

Engage your colleagues in middle grades best practice through the Successful Middle School Program and help us expand the body of research by participating in the Successful Middle School Research Project.

Explore the full Policy Agenda and take action at
amle.org/advocacy

The Association for Middle Level Education
2550 Corporate Exchange Dr., Ste. 324
Columbus, OH 43231

