Middle School Honors Task Force Recommendations

Introduction:

In the fall of 2009, District Administration and Middle School Building leadership established the Middle School Honors Task Force. The Task Force was created in response to the Gifted Program Review Observations provided by Mr. James LoGiudice in June 2009. Mr. LoGiudice provided the following considerations in relation to the Middle School honors program:

Though a range of honors level classes exist, they often seem to do so in name only. It is difficult for teachers, administrators, students presently enrolled in these classes, or former middle school students now in the high school, to define what characterizes these offerings as substantively different from other same grade level courses. When asked to what extent are the honors courses advanced in content, pacing, complexity of concepts, and degree of learning activities and assignments, most answered that this happens sporadically and is not consistent across content or grade level. Often times these aspects depend on the teacher, not the curriculum, or a defined set of expectations.

Yet, the Charles Patton Middle School is a model in many ways for what a middle school should be in terms of paying attention to the social and emotional needs of students at this unique developmental stage. The principal is recognized for his leadership in this area by peers in his field at both the state and national level.

Effort now should be turned to also further improving academic challenge and performance as key part of this successful model. Anthony Jackson, co-author of Turning Points 2000, an update of the Carnegie Report that has provided the underpinning principles for middle school reform, initiated in 1989, sends us this message about academic excellence in today’s world (LoGiudice 2009):

The emphasis on the developmental needs of the middle school student is not misplaced, but it has been perhaps overemphasized. Now we need to bring our efforts back into balance with a corresponding focus on intellectual development. (Education World Interview)

Mr. LoGiudice’s considerations influenced the creation of the Middle School Honors Task Force. The task force’s initial goal was to evaluate the current middle school ‘honors program’ and make recommendations for changes. The Task Force understood the current honors model could not continue. As the Task Force began studying other middle school programs and evaluating educational research, the scope of the task force increased. The task force recognized that any changes made to adjust current honors programming would have an impact on all levels of instruction. Additionally, the task force acknowledged the many strengths of the Middle School program as a foundation to promote continuous school improvement. Continuous school improvement became the guiding principle that shaped the task force agenda, recommendations and action plans.
Task Force Process:

The task force began by studying other Middle School programs and evaluating educational research on middle school programming. The literature review included:

- *Century Middle School Honors Program*. Thornton. CO: Century Middle School, N.d.
- *Middle School Honors Overview*. Richmond, VA: Virginia Department of Education. N.d.
While reviewing the literature and studying other middle schools, the task force became interested in three specific programs:

- International Baccalaureate program for middle years
- Cambridge International program for middle years
- CollegeBoard – Springboard for middle years

The task force invited representatives from each program to present information to a committee of teachers, parents, administration, board members and high school educators. This committee provided the task force with recommendations in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of each program.

As the task force began to develop its own recommendations, it desired more feedback from district stakeholders. The task force wanted to gain a better understanding of the strengths and concerns of the current middle school program. Specifically, the task force wanted to learn more about the level of ‘challenge’ perceived by different stakeholders. Data from the focus group discussions enhanced the importance of redirecting the focus of the task force toward a theme of continuous school improvement, rather than focus on only the few existing honors courses. Focus groups were conducted in September of 2010 with the following groups:

- 8th grade students
- 10th grade students
- 12th grade students
- Middle School teachers
- Parents of current middle and high school students
- High School teachers

The task force reviewed the content of each focus group and identified strengths and concerns that were common to each stakeholder group. See Appendix A for examples of focus group questions.

Results of the Focus Groups:

Data from the focus group discussions is embedded in the following recommendations. The task force reviewed the data from each focus group discussion and identified areas of strength and concern that were common to all stakeholders. Identified areas of strength and concern represent larger themes and perceptions that were identified during the focus group discussions and discussed at length during task force meetings. Data from the focus groups was also compared to the Mr. LoGiudice’s findings and previous middle school evaluations.

Identified strengths:
- Teams and attention given to all students
- Team concept prevents students from falling through the cracks
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- Math sequencing lends itself to appropriate challenge
- Atmosphere is supportive
- Quality of educational staff
- PSSA scores
- Student preparation for high school

Identified concerns:
- Value of looping
- Perfunctory worksheets
- Expectations and accountability varied among teams and teachers
- Inconsistent challenge and alignment of grammar, writing, science and social studies curricula
- Negative impact of cross teaming
- Merit of two year literacy program
- Instructional design geared toward lower level of Bloom’s taxonomy

Recommendations:

Below are the task force recommendations. Recommendations six and seven will address the results from the program evaluations of Cambridge, IB and SpringBoard.

1. **End looping of 6th and 7th grade teachers.**

While looping does provide many benefits, ultimately it prevents teachers from becoming subject area specialists and contributes to the perception that some courses are less challenging. Many students believe it is less challenging to have the same teacher two years in a row. Additionally, looping contributes significantly to inconsistencies across teams and subject areas.

Implementation: Fall 2011
Financial cost: Possible classroom moves depending on teacher assignments.

2. **Keep teaming, but mix the students in 7th grade.**

The Middle School teaming concept was cited as an overall strength of the middle school program. Many parents, students and teachers believe the teaming concept provides the structure for teachers to best identify student needs. Several parents credited teaming for providing teachers the ability to “find kids before they fall through the cracks” and “find kids under the radar and promote those kids.” Students and parents suggested mixing the students in 7th grade like they do in 8th grade to give students the opportunity to meet more students.

Implementation: Fall 2011
Financial cost: $0
3. **Develop a protocol to obtain parent and student feedback yearly.**

The focus group discussions provided invaluable feedback to the task force. Every teacher should have the opportunity to obtain feedback on curriculum and instruction from parents and students. Like any form of data, it should be used in concert with teacher perceptions, observations, student achievement and curriculum goals. Yearly feedback will continue to promote the concept of continuous improvement and provide data on program strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, yearly feedback will provide a vehicle to measure the implementation of the task force recommendations.

**Implementation:** January 2012  
**Financial cost:** Committee work $4,000  
Optional software package $5,000 - $8,000

4. **Create leveled courses in all disciplines with the exception of math. Current math sequencing would remain in place.**

When parents, students and teachers were asked to provide examples of ‘challenge’ in the middle school curriculum, all cited the math sequencing. The grouping of students and levels contributed to the increased challenge. Two levels within each discipline will provide students with greater choice and appropriate challenge. Detailed course descriptions and expectations will be created for each level. Students will be required to apply and obtain a teacher recommendation for the higher level; however, it will ultimately be a student and parent choice to select the appropriate level based on teacher recommendations, course descriptions, expectations and student interest.

In order to help students adjust to the middle school program there will be two levels in 6th grade English. All other subject areas, with the exception of math, will have one level. In 7th and 8th grade there will be two levels in English, Science and Social Studies. Geography will remain as a single level, however the task force recommends evaluating geography for a second level during the phasing-in process, as well as evaluating the effects and impact of levels in each discipline as they are phased in by subject area and grade level.

The higher level course will be referred to as honors. For example, 6th grade English options will now be 6th grade English or 6th grade English Honors. Creating two levels and implementing all ten recommendations will raise the caliber of instruction and learning for all students at the middle school. It is of the utmost importance that all Honors courses are truly honorable in every aspect. With these adjustments, some students will find obtaining an ‘A’ to be more difficult. The administration and teachers will provide clear expectations for student success at each level. The administration will also work with parents and students to help them understand course expectations.
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Chart below provides an example of subject areas with two levels and phase-in dates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Social Studies</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Geography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Already exists)</td>
<td>Fall 2011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Already exists)</td>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>Fall of 2013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Discuss options in fall of 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Already exists)</td>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>Fall of 2013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Financial Cost:
- SY 2011-12: Curriculum Writing $4,800, Professional Development $2,000
- SY 2012-13: Curriculum Writing $4,800, Professional Development $2,000
- SY 2013-14: Curriculum Writing $7,200, Professional Development $2,000

5. **Replace 7th grade Literacy requirement.**

Curriculum and content in 6th and 7th grade Literacy can be combined and condensed. Additionally, the literacy course in 6th grade must be more closely aligned with the 6th grade English course. Recommendations for course work to replace 7th grade Literacy will need to be developed.

Implementation: Fall 2012

Financial Cost:
- SY 2011-12: Course proposal $2,000
- SY 2012-13: Curriculum writing $2,400, Professional Development $2,000

6. **Adopt CollegeBoard-SpringBoard Program for 6-8th grade English.**

The task force established a separate committee comprised of parents, administration and teachers to review three potential programs. The committee evaluated the strengths and appropriate fit of each program for the middle school. After an in depth review of each program, the committee strongly recommended the SpringBoard program for the Middle School English program. SpringBoard is a clearly articulated, proven model of rigorous instruction that back maps the essential skills and knowledge students need to prepare for Advanced Placement and college success.

It is recommended that SpringBoard be used as the core curriculum for 6-8th grade English. The 6th grade Literacy curriculum will be adjusted to support the content in the 6th grade English course. The SpringBoard curriculum framework can be used to develop two levels of instruction at each grade level. The framework will provide all students with the skills
necessary to continue in Advanced Placement courses in high school. The framework will also provide the foundation for a higher level English class for those students prepared and excited for the challenge.

Before SpringBoard is purchased, a group of middle and high school English teachers will be asked to review the program and begin planning for implementation in the fall of 2011. While it is being recommended that SpringBoard be used as the framework and foundation for the Middle School English program, it is understood that the district will need to supplement the material and adjust the SpringBoard curriculum framework to PA standards and district expectations. High school teachers will collaborate with middle school teachers to establish clear expectations for grammar and writing at each grade level. The 6th grade Literacy course will be revised to complement the 6th grade English curriculum and skills. Chart below provides further details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>SpringBoard (2 levels) - English 6th grade - English 6th grade Honors</td>
<td>Rename for 6th grade - Combine 6th and 7th to one year - Complement the 6th grade English curriculum - AT Literacy grouping will remain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>SpringBoard (2 levels) - English 7th grade - English 7th grade Honors</td>
<td>Remediation program for Basic, Below Basic students - Introduce new course option for Fall of 2012 - options could include Global Perspective course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>SpringBoard - English 8th grade - English 8th grade Honors - Creative Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implementation: Fall 2011 – Pilot 6th grade Springboard for all students
Financial Cost:  
SY 2011-12 Springboard 6th grade consumable $ 7,700  
Professional Development $ 6,000  
SY 2012-13 Springboard 6th -7th grade consumable $15,400  
Professional Development $ 6,000  
SY 2013-14 Springboard 6th-8th grade consumable $23,100  
Professional Development $ 2,000

7. **Establish curriculum consistency.**

All focus groups noted inconsistencies across teams and content areas. Curriculum in each area will be reviewed and adjusted to include the following:

- Revised curriculum documents including detailed frameworks for all subject areas
- Identified strategies, embedded assessments and skills that apply to each grade level
- Extension and enrichment activities
• Opportunities for analysis and higher order thinking skills
• Identified learning outcomes by subject and grade level
• Detailed syllabus for each course and level
• Improved/revised common assessments
• Revised tuning protocol to review curriculum documents

The committee formed to evaluate IB, Cambridge and SpringBoard found the middle years program for IB and Cambridge not to be a good fit for UCFSD. Cost and connection to the high school sequence were two major reasons for concern. Many on the committee were interested in the IB diploma program for the high school, a topic the high school would need to pursue if interested. However, the IB and Cambridge presentations confirmed the task force inclination to create more detailed curriculum documents across all disciplines. The importance of all teachers in all disciplines speaking the same language when it comes to student outcomes, strategies and skills is critical to the middle school program.

Implementation: Ongoing as part of curriculum phase-in.
Financial Cost: $2,400

8. **Initiate content area professional development.**

Discussions about looping naturally lent themselves to the importance of teachers being subject area specialists. During focus group discussions, many teachers desired professional development focused on their content. There has been some frustration with the amount of professional development over the years focused on process and skills rather than being specific to subject area content and teaching. The task force recognizes the correlation between greater subject area expertise and the ability to differentiate and plan for opportunities for greater analysis during instruction. District administration will contact local universities to provide subject area professional development through select seminars and course work.

Implementation: Ongoing as part of curriculum phase in.
Financial Cost: $3,400 each year

9. **Establish professional development activities to promote analysis and high order thinking skills.**

During the focus group discussions, many students desired more opportunities to “discuss topics” or “dive more deeply” into a certain topic. Many of those comments were in relation to the amount of study skills being taught at the middle school that at times do not feel connected to content learning. While the task force supports the emphasis on study skills, it recommends that more of the skills be taught in relation to subject area content. Students, teachers and parents all shared their desire for more ‘challenging’ or ‘engaging’ work in the
areas of social studies, English and science. Use of worksheets, and the term ‘busy work’ was cited as examples of less engaging or challenging work.

The task force recognizes the importance for students to master certain skills, content and concepts. Rote memorization and the use of worksheets to master skills and content are critical to any educational program. Equally as important at the Middle School level is for students to have many opportunities to apply, analyze, create and evaluate the subject area in which they are learning. As each subject area reviews and revises 6th-8th grade curriculum, opportunities for analysis in the classroom will be identified. Professional development in understanding and using Bloom’s Taxonomy will be provided in each subject area.

Implementation: Ongoing as part of curriculum phase-in.
Financial Cost: $1,000 each year

10. Create subject area department chairs.

Subject area department chairs are critical to promote all the above recommendations. Subject area department chairs will provide needed leadership and accountability to promote curriculum consistency, goals and recommendations. Subject area department chairs will be responsible for the following:

- Provide agenda and structure for department meetings
- Facilitate collaboration on subject area goals and instruction
- Collaborate with high school department chairs to foster curriculum consistency
- Meet monthly with Director of Curriculum and Instruction and building administration
- Review and be responsible for department consistency

Implementation: English and Social Studies Fall of 2011
Science, Math and Special Areas Fall of 2012
Financial Cost: As per contract - $880 + $150 per person in department

Other areas for consideration:

The focus group discussions provided many insights to our middle school program. Other areas worthy of further investigation include:

- Honors celebration
- Student led conferences
- Math as a special for scheduling purposes
- Student seating during lunch
- Student use of book bags during the school day