To: Superintendent Jeffrey Young
From: Carolyn L. Turk
Re: Materials for the December 15th Middle School Presentation to the School Committee
Date: December 11, 2009

Per your request, enclosed please find materials that represent a brief summary of current research on best practices for educating children ages 11-14. Both the research and the resources cited reflect approaches identified as successfully implemented either locally, nationally, and/or internationally.

Executive Summary

Cambridge educators, families, and policymakers are committed to being partners in the continuous growth and development of educational programming across the district. In recent years, a renewed interest in a review of middle-level education has been a priority for the district. The first stages of this review have been documented in the 2008 Blue Ribbon Commission on Middle School Education Report. In addition, a companion document entitled Shared Youth, Shared Strategies, has been developed by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Middle School Youth. The purpose of this plan is to unite city agencies, schools and community partners to enhance Out-of-School-Time opportunities for middle school youth and families across the city.

The information provided in the December 15, 2009 presentation to the School Committee is in response to the "proposed process/timeline for decision-making regarding middle grades education in Cambridge and the specific request for a summary of current research on best practices of educating children in this age group". Both the presentation document and the accompanying resource articles provide best practice background and supporting considerations on the nature of middle-level learners along with researched program characteristics that when implemented over time produce high functioning learning environments for young adolescents. The combined information is intended to serve as one part of the next stage of the district's work on the topic of middle grades.

Definitions

Middle School is the period of time between elementary school and high school, and functions as a bridge between the two. [Source: math-and-reading-help-for- kids.org / Middle Schools Around the World] In addition, by and large, middle schools are also defined as including grades 5 through 8.

Best Practices are defined as strategies, activities or approaches that have been shown through research and evaluation to be effective and/or efficient.

Keys to Educating Young Adolescents

Adolescence is a pivotal developmental and transitional period in which youth begin to form a sense of personal identity, special interests, likes and dislikes. In support of this phase of development, the National Middle School Association recommends the Four Essential Attributes and Sixteen Program and Practices Characteristics cited below. These recommendations have also been adopted by the European League of Middle Level Education.

■ **Essential Attributes**

Educational programs for young adolescents must be:

- Developmentally Responsive
- Challenging
- Empowering
- Equitable

These four essential attributes of successful middle level education can be realized and achieved best through programs and practices that are in lie with the following 16 characteristics:

■ **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

1. Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.
2. Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
3. Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
4. Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.
5. Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

■ **Leadership and Organization**

6. A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.
7. Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.
8. Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.
9. Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.
10. Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

■ **Culture and Community**

11. The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive and supportive of all.
12. Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
13. Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.
14. Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.
15. The school actively involves families in the education of their children.
16. The school includes community and business partners.

Best Practices That Support Successful Implementation

Research indicates that configuration alone is not a panacea to the middle school "slump" (Bradley, 1998; NMSA). A policy brief by Alliance for Excellent Education (2003) entitled *The Building Blocks of Success for America's Middle and High School Students,* viewed the following as the pillars of success in offering quality middle-level-education:

- High quality classroom teachers and school administrators
- Rigorous academic standards, curricula, and methods of instruction
- Small classes and small schools
- High quality facilities
- High quality text books, instructional materials, and library resources
- Access to computer technology
- High quality counseling
- Support services for struggling students
- Common planning time
- Scheduling plans
- Elective subjects
- Mini-course programs
- Time allotted for instructional core
- Guidance programs
- Grade span configuration [Not in isolation]

New York Research Study

Key Findings

Higher-performing schools build a culture of success by consistently maintaining these five common elements:

1. Trusting and respectful relationships
2. Students' social and emotional well-being
3. Teamwork
4. Evidence-based decision making
5. Shared vision of mission and goals

Resource List

A plethora of information is available regarding the education of middle level learners. The resources included as part of this Executive Summary represent materials reviewed in preparation for the middle school presentation and thought to be valuable not only for the presentation but also for the district's future on this topic.

Presentation Detail Resources

1. Breaking Ranks in the Middle Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform – Executive Summary [NASSP]. **ENCLOSED**
2. Characteristics of Exemplary Schools for Young Adolescents. Research Summary. [NMSA]. **ENCLOSED**
3. Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path. A policy and Practice Brief... Robert Balfanz. [Talent Development Middle Grades Program] **ENCLOSED**
4. Reexamining Middle School Effects: A Comparison of Middle Grades Students in Middle Schools and K-8 Schools. [Weiss and Kipnes, Columbia University] **ENCLOSED**
5. Stuck in the Middle: Strategies to Engage Middle-Level Learners. [The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement]. **ENCLOSED**
6. The Relationship Between Middle Level Grade Span Configuration, Professional Development, and Student Achievement. [Vicki L. Schmitt Online Research in Middle Level Education RMLE] **ENCLOSED**
7. This We Believe: Keys to Education Young Adolescents: 16 Characteristics [NMSA] **ENCLOSED**
8. What is the Best Middle School Configuration? A Research Brief produced by the Center for Policy Studies, Education Research, and Community Development **ENCLOSED**
9. What Makes Middle Schools Work? A report on best practices in New York State middle Schools [School of Education/University @ Albany] **ENCLOSED**
10. What Makes Middle Schools Work? Summary of Key Findings[School of Education/University @ Albany] **--- AND ---** New York Research Study Best Practice Framework Detail [School of Education/University @ Albany] **ENCLOSED**

Print Resources Available at the Office of the Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning

1. Blue Ribbon Commission on Middle School Education – Report to the School Committee [2008]
2. Breaking Ranks in the Middle; Strategies for Leading Middle School Reform, National Association of Secondary School Principals [2006]
3. Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe , National Middle School Association [2003]
4. This We Believe; Keys to Educating Young Adolescents, National Middle School Association [2010]
5. This We Believe in Action; Implementing Successful Middle Level Schools, National Middle School Association [2005]

Additional Resources

Links to Domestic and International Sites Containing Middle School Related Information

1. **Best Practices from High Performing Middle Schools: How Successful Schools remove Obstacles and Create Pathways to Learning** This book serves as a valuable tool for middle-level schools by providing excellent practical examples of how real-life educators are implementing the best practices of relationships, emotional and social well-being, collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and shared vision. --From the Foreword by Gerald N. Tirozzi, Executive Director, National Association of Secondary School Principals [Wilcox & Angelis, 2009)

2. **European League for Middle Level Education** http://www.elmle.org/
   The European Affiliate of the National Middle School Association.
   ELMLE 2010 Conference ◙ Budapest ◙ January 21-24

3. **Laborlawtalk Entry** http://encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/Middle_school
   Information and reading on middle schools around the world.

4. **Make It Happen (USA)** http://www.edc.org/FSC/MIH/
   An approach that improves middle school education for students with diverse learning abilities.

5. **Making Middle Grades Work (USA)**
   http://www.sreb.org/programs/MiddleGrades/MiddleGradesindex.asp
   A project about making the middle grades of high school more effective.

6. **Meridian** http://www.ncsu.edu/meridian/
   Electronic journal dedicated to research and practice of computer technology in middle school classrooms.

7. **Middle Grades SPOTLIGHT** – http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/nl/mdlgrdsnwsltrs.asp
   A Best Practice Periodical – Middle and High School Improvement Office – California Department of Education

8. **Middle Web (USA)** http://www.middleweb.com/
   MiddleWeb provides a wealth of resources for schools, districts, educators, parents, and public school advocates working to raise achievement for all students in the middle grades.

9. **MidLink Magazine (USA)** http://www.ncsu.edu/midlink/
   Online magazine highlighting exemplary work from the most creative classrooms around the globe.

10. **National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform** http://www.mgforum.org/
An alliance of over 60 educators, researchers, national associations, and officers of professional organizations and foundations committed to promoting the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents.

11. **National Association for Middle Schooling in Australia** http://www.mysa.org.au
The national association for middle schooling in Australia. Their website includes a number of interesting links. Seeking closer contact with other middle schools - contact – Susan Hearfield - Office@mysa.org.au

12. **National Middle School Association (USA)** http:/www.nmsa.org/
Association for those committed to the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents. NMSA is the only national education association dedicated exclusively to the growth of middle level

13. **National Middle Schooling Project (Aust)** http://www.acsainc.com.au/pages/natm.php
Across the nation there has been an increasing awareness in recent times that the 'Middle Years of Schooling', need to be recognized as a stage of schooling in its own right. There has been a great deal of research to support this view and to suggest new ways of helping schools to adapt to the needs of young adolescents.

14. **Phi Delta Kappa (USA)** http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kmidad.htm
A special report on middle-grades research

15. **The Middle Level Leadership Center (USA)** http://www.mllc.org/
To promote quality middle level education through the development and dissemination of knowledge about effective site-level leadership

16. **The New England League of Middle Schools (USA)** http://www.nelms.org/
Resources and research.

17. **The New York Times / Education Section : The Critical Years**
http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/news/education/series/thecriticalyears/index.html
Articles and multimedia products in this series look at changing theories of how middle school should be taught.

18. **Talent Development Middle School** http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/tdmg/index.html/
The Talent Development Middle Grades Program (TDMG) offers comprehensive and customized support for schools with middle grades and upper elementary students

19. **Turning Points** http://www.turningpts.org/
Turning Points is a comprehensive education reform model that focuses on improving student learning.

20. **Wisconsin Association For Middle Level Education (USA)** http://www.wamle.org/
Dedicated to promoting the educational experiences of middle level learners.