

Renewing Our Commitment to Young Adolescents

The Middle School movement has been one of the most influential and long-lasting educational initiatives, lasting from 1950 to the present. Beginning in the 1960s and building steadily into the 1990s, Maine, like many other states, saw a focus on middle level education research, programmatic adaptations, and professional development leading to changes in local policy at both local and state levels. Influenced by such national documents as *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescent* (2003), both *Turning Points* documents (1989, 2000), *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (2006), and the work of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (2000), as well as summer institutes, and other activities sponsored by professional associations, a number of middle level schools made important strides in improving their learning environments, becoming more effective for young adolescents.

In the last 20 years, many of Maine's middle level schools have made significant improvements that create academic rigor and are developmentally responsive for 10-to-15 year olds. The Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI) gave a huge boost to middle level education when it provided every 7th and 8th grade student (and their teachers) with access to resources beyond the scope of most middle school libraries, and changed the way that students learned, using the tools of the 21st century in ways that most middle schools in this country do not. During this time, Maine's middle level schools have been highly regarded nationally for their leadership—particularly in curriculum integration and advocacy for partner teams—yet too many of our middle level schools have reached a plateau where achievement as measured by the Maine Educational Assessments (MEAs) has stalled. In too many Maine towns, schools have reverted to practices that hinder both student learning and the continued development of students' intellectual, social, emotional and physical needs.

Many of Maine's middle level schools either have not implemented responsive programs and practices that research has confirmed are effective in increasing student learning, or have ceased to provide them. The easier changes to implement - changes in organization - have been made. School climate has improved by making middle level schools safe and engaging places for middle level students; but most middle level schools have not implemented comprehensive improvements in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Doda & Thompson, 2003) Thirty years ago, we started this work in middle level schools with great enthusiasm and commitment, but in many places we have stopped short of achieving our goals. Faced with new challenges, many of Maine's middle level schools are in a state of "arrested development" (Dickinson, 2001), attempting to meet the needs of a challenging student population while responding to increased accountability from state and federal mandates.