

# Structural and Cultural Elements of Middle College Programs: Leadership in Schools for At-Risk Youth

by

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## **Abstract**

This multi-site case study examines the structural and cultural elements of an innovative high school program for at-risk students called “middle college” schools. These high schools serve at-risk youth, who have shown academic potential at some time in their careers through a smaller learning community model of high school with a desired maximum of 140 students located on college campuses. This study employed data collected through interviews with principals, teachers, central office personnel, and students. In addition, a number of student outcome variables were collected and analyzed. The structural and cultural conditions of the schools, small enrollments, location on college campuses, a small student-teacher ratio, supportive counseling services, and a mix of instructional styles, all promoted student success for at-risk youth.

## **Summary**

### **Objectives and Purpose**

Two current and important educational reforms—innovative programs for at-risk youth and smaller learning communities--are investigated in this study through a focus on an inventive program for at-risk youth, termed “middle college” high schools. First, students who have dropped out of high school and never finish risk serious longterm financial and social challenges. Numerous programs have been developed to serve these youth, with varying degrees of success. This study will add to this literature with a detailed analysis of four middle college high schools. Secondly, considerable federal funds and foundation support (primarily through the Bill and Melinda Gate Foundation) have been applied to designing, developing, and implementing various forms of “smaller learning communities” to make high schools more successful academically and more socially compassionate and considerate. These two aspects of schools are part of the philosophy and foundation of middle college programs.

This study examines the structural and cultural elements of an innovative high school program for at-risk students called “middle college” schools. These high schools serve a

unique set of at-risk youth, those who have show academic potential at some time in their careers, but due to a number of different factors have dropped out of school or flunked out. A middle college program is a smaller learning community model of high school with a maximum of 140 students located on college campuses.

### **Theoretical Frame work**

This study draws on a number of conceptual and theoretical literatures to help understand the implementation, administration, and instruction of middle colleges. The literature on school change and innovation provide relevant factors to consider when examining the implementation issues of these schools (see Fullan, 2002; Louis and Miles, 1990). Understanding the importance of particular structural features of these schools is informed by models and concepts in sociology and organizational theory (Bolman and Deal, 2002; Collins, 2001). The research of Schein (1996), Deal and Peterson, (1999), and, more recently Fullan (2002) provide focus and ideas related to the unique middle college school cultures and the ways leaders shape those cultures.

### **Methodology**

This is a multi-school case study of four middle college high schools. The schools were all located in a large county district in the South. A variety of data sources were collected to examine the implementation of the programs, the structures of each school, the nature of leadership—both administrative and distributed--and the cultural elements of these schools. Data were analyzed both within schools and between schools looking for evidence of successful implementation of the programs as well as cross-case patterns of organizational conditions that supported student learning.

### **Data**

This multi-site case study collected data in interviews with principals, teachers, central office personnel, and students. These interviews were conducted on the school sites, with some follow-up interviews by telephone. In addition, a number of student outcome variables were collected and analyzed including student test scores, course completion rates, attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates within and across schools. These data were examined for consistency and trustworthiness. Member checks were conducted to validate perceptions and specific empirical, chronological data.

The sample of schools included four middle college high schools of less than 140 students each located in a large, diverse Southern county school district. These middle college programs were, interestingly, each located on a post-secondary campus of quite different focus and mission and clientele. One school was located in a small, religiously oriented liberal arts college, and housed in a renovated house on campus. The second school was located in a large, active, and well regarded technical college that served thousands of students. The third high school was situated in a historically Black state university. The fourth middle college program found space in a historically all-female, Black liberal arts college with a long history. In this program, students take regular high school courses,

but are also able to enroll in post-secondary courses in their college settings. These settings shaped the nature of programs in part, but numerous similar approaches could be found in all the middle college programs.

## **Results, Conclusions**

The four middle college high schools provided a particularly rich source of data on programs for at-risk students, the structural and cultural features of these programs that appeared to enhance factors that increase student achievement and eventual completion of high school. Additionally, these data across cases provide an in-depth picture of the influence of smaller learning communities on students at risk.

In these four schools the overall academic progress of students has been significantly improved. Over four hundred students have re-enrolled in high school and are making progress toward graduation. The vast majority of students are passing and completing courses they had previously failed. And, dozens each year are graduating from these high schools. This has cut the district's dropout rate in one-half in a four year period and increased enrollments due to these students returning to school. Finally, many of these once failing students are also gaining college credit in courses they are taking in their host institutions and, upon graduation, enrolling in post-secondary educational institutions.

Data gathered on the programs point to several important findings related to the implementation of such new smaller learning communities for at-risk youth. First, selection of the principal should entail a search for leaders who have both the administrative skills to start a new school from the ground up and the socio-emotional skills in working with students who come with many challenges and needs (Goleman, et al, 2001). Second, teacher selection is equally important, seeking highly skilled teachers who can develop differentiated and innovative instructional strategies aimed at at-risk students, and high levels of "emotional intelligence." Third, the data from these schools suggests that student recruitment, selection, and initial socialization are crucial. These middle college high schools employed interviews, review of prior student achievement data, discussion with parents and caregivers, as well as an extensive written application to be completed by the student.

Finally, staff and administrators needed to address a host of administrative, instructional, social, and political obstacles in establishing collaborative working relationships with the host college (Bolman and Deal, 2002). Legal and insurance issues need to be worked out. Tuition for courses had to be negotiated. Instructional strategies attuned to the motivation, focus, and level of the students needed to be custom designed, implemented, and refined. Strong and deep social relationships between staff and students were key to developing and enhancing the "personalization" of these schools (Goleman, et al, 2001; Newmann et al, 1996). Additionally, the school principal has to work in the political

frame to persuade and negotiate agreements on space use, laboratory access, pool and gym use, and cafeteria access with the host college (Bolman and Deal, 2002).

All programs shared some basic structural elements, such as small size, low student-teacher ratio, and considerable counselor support, but each took advantage of the local college settings differently. Some were located in college buildings, while others had renovated houses for their “home.” While all the programs started late (usually after 10AM), each changed the class meeting times to address individual needs of students. Additionally, these middle college programs focused more on “authentic instruction” with discussion, engaged learning, and relevancy part of the course format (Newman et al, 1996).

The high schools possessed cultures that were more like a small college than a traditional high school. Students were carefully selected and socialized into a student culture that provided considerable autonomy with a deep sense of responsibility for work and appropriate behavior. Students who could not thrive in this environment were required to return to traditional high schools. Most realized the uniqueness of the middle college setting and worked hard to live up to expectations.

The professional culture of teachers and staff combined strong socio-emotional norms with an abiding sense of commitment to helping these students succeed and cope with the many challenges they faced outside of the middle college (e.g. gangs, pregnancy, marginal housing, etc.). Interviews with staff pointed to a high level of “emotional intelligence” and “resonant leadership” skills developed and reinforced through collaborative planning and discussion (Goleman et al, 2001). Unlike many traditional high schools, there was a deep sense of concern, caring, and respect between and among staff and students.

### **Educational and Conceptual Importance**

Both the structural and the cultural features of these middle college programs fostered high student attendance, collaborative problem solving, student completion of coursework, a low incidence of dropouts from the programs, and a significant number of high school completions. This study provides a useful set of ideas on how to design and implement middle college programs, but also extends our understanding of the ways leaders build distributive leadership, shape school structures and cultures that help at-risk youth complete high school.

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