

2001/02 Baseline Analysis of Self-Study Data

Illinois Turning Points Schools

December 2002



A report by the Center for Prevention Research and Development,
a unit of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs
at the University of Illinois.



This report is funded in part by the National Turning Points Center,
located at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston, Massachusetts.

A Design for Middle Schools

Middle-grades education continues to receive fewer resources than those allocated to preschool, elementary, and secondary education. As a result, middle-grades students can experience high rates of underachievement and develop behavior patterns that can preclude them from achieving educational success in later grades and life success as adults. Fortunately, middle-grades education is in the midst of changing to better meet the needs of adolescents.

In response to the seminal *Turning Points* report written by the Carnegie Corporation in 1989 (and the subsequent work of the Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative (MGSSPI) and its network of schools), the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) in Boston, Massachusetts, implemented the National Turning Points Network in 1999. Implementation of the Turning Points design for comprehensive middle school reform utilizes a network of regional centers with proven track records in New England, Missouri, and Illinois. The Association of Illinois Middle-Level Schools (AIMS) is the regional center serving the 11 Turning Points schools in Illinois.

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In addition to focusing on strengthening academics, the Turning Points model concentrates on the socio-behavioral development of students by establishing a caring, supportive environment that values adolescents; by ensuring a significant adult relationship for every student; and by promoting mental health and fitness.

During the 2001/02 school year, each of the Illinois Turning Points schools participated in the School Improvement Self-Study developed, designed, and administered by the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. The Self-Study is a data collection system consisting of a set of surveys completed by teachers, principals, and students in a school. The results of the surveys are reported to the school for use in planning and monitoring school improvement efforts. Results from the Self-Study provide each school with reliable information for use in school improvement planning and monitoring efforts. The data can also inform educators and policy makers at local and district levels about both the status of middle-grades education in Illinois and the practices and programs best suited to help students succeed.

Characteristics of Illinois Turning Points Schools

The eleven Illinois middle-level schools (with 8 administrators, 367 staff members, and 5,983 students) that participated in the 2001/02 Self-Study are a relatively diverse group in terms of student demographics and organizational structures:

- Seven of the 11 schools are ethnically mixed. The other four schools have a student population in which a single ethnicity is predominant: one school is predominantly white/Caucasian, one school is predominantly black/African-American, and two schools are predominantly Hispanic.
- Lunch status is relatively evenly divided between the 11 schools: seven schools have student populations in which at least 60% are receiving a free or reduced-price (FR) lunch, and four schools have less than 60% FR lunch students.
- Eight schools have a middle-school grade configuration (grades 6-8) and the remaining three are traditional junior high schools serving grades 7-8.
- The schools are well distributed with regard to enrollment: three schools have under 500 students, four schools have 500-700 students, and four schools have over 700 students.
- School location is evenly divided: six schools are suburban (three in Chicago) and five schools are urban (four in Chicago).

Turning Points Principles and Self-Study Data

The Self-Study survey data from these 11 schools has been analyzed and organized according to the Turning Points principles. However, the first two principles (“Teach a curriculum grounded in standards” and “Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students”) both focus heavily on standards, so they have been combined in this report for an abridged principle, “Use standards as a basis for curriculum, assessments, and instruction.”

This report will cover these Turning Points principles in the following order: Organize relationships for learning; Use standards as a basis for curriculum, assessments, and instructions; Prepare teachers for middle grades; Govern democratically by all staff members; Provide a safe and healthy school environment; and Involve parents and communities in supporting learning.

Relationships

“Organize relationships for learning.”

Interdisciplinary Team Practices

An important component of middle school reform is teaching and learning in smaller, personalized communities that foster nurturing and caring adult-child relationships. This is commonly called “structural reform” because it involves changing the way in which schools operate. Once the new structure of teaching and scheduling is in place, other reform elements can be implemented, and have a greater chance of succeeding.

One method of reaching this goal is through interdisciplinary teaming, in which teachers from different subject areas work together to plan, develop, coordinate, and implement curricula for the same group of students. Interdisciplinary learning occurs by integrating subject areas and by teaching students that skills such as reading and math are interconnected and necessary for real-world applications. In order to effectively create and implement coordinated and integrated curricula, interdisciplinary teams need regular time to plan and work together as a group. This common planning time (CPT) needs to be separate from the individual planning time teachers already utilize.

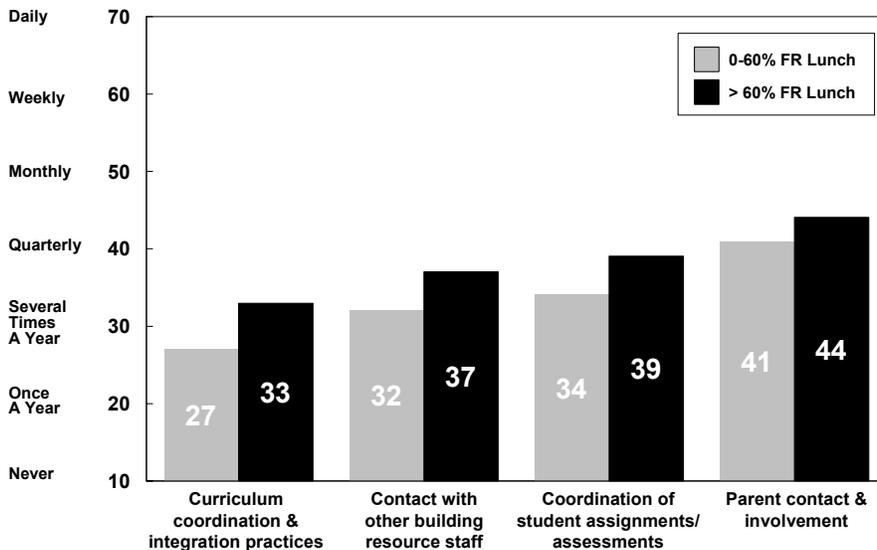
Of the Illinois Turning Points schools, only one is not teaming. Eight schools are teaming with low levels of CPT, and two are teaming with high levels of CPT. “High levels” of CPT is defined as a minimum of four meetings per week, with each meeting lasting at least 30 minutes. “Low levels” of CPT is defined as anything less than “high levels,” either in frequency or duration.

While it is customary for CPRD to disaggregate the Self-Study data on the basis of teaming level of implementation (LOI), this is problematic with the Illinois Turning Points schools. Two of these LOI categories (not teaming; and teaming with high levels of CPT) have less than three schools, thereby making schools and their practices more easily identifiable, and the data therefore less confidential. It is worth noting, however, that prior research has shown that when teachers in schools fully engaged in teaming are provided with high levels of CPT, student self-reported outcomes improve—including depression, behavior problems, self-esteem, and academic efficacy¹. In addition, student achievement scores improve dramatically, particularly for schools with high percentages (60% or more) of FR lunch students

¹Mertens, S., Flowers, N., & Mulhall, P. (1998). *The Middle Start Initiative, phase I: a longitudinal analysis of Michigan middle-level schools*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois

The Self-Study measures four scales of “team practices,” including *curriculum coordination and integration practices*, *coordination of student assignments and assessments*, *parent contact and involvement*, and *contact with other building resource staff*. Illinois Turning Points teachers engage most often (between *quarterly* and *monthly*) in the team practice of *parent contact and involvement*. *Coordination of student assignments and assessments* occurs almost *quarterly*, while *contact with other building resource staff* happens between *several times a year* and *quarterly*. Teachers engage least often in the team practice of *curriculum coordination and integration*, approximately *several times a year*. Interestingly, schools with over 60% FR lunch students engage in all of these team practices more frequently than the schools with less than 60% FR students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Illinois Turning Points Schools (2001/02) Interdisciplinary Team Practices by Lunch Status



Quality of Team Interactions

Overall, Illinois Turning Points teachers are positive about the quality of interactions among teachers and students on their interdisciplinary teams. In fact, teachers *agree* with three interaction areas measured by the Self-Study: *teachers address student needs*, *have high expectations for all students*, and *feel a sense of team cohesion and harmony*.

A fourth interaction area, *teachers are prepared for implementing team practices*, was rated as slightly less than *agree*. This is a key indicator of whether teachers have appropriate knowledge of team practices and are ready and willing to implement them. School improvement begins with teachers recognizing the value of reform and gaining confidence in the skills needed to enact change. Schools with over 60% FR lunch students are more likely to *agree* with this, while schools with less than 60% FR lunch students assess themselves midway between *agree* and *neither agree nor disagree*.

Advisory Program Activities

A teacher-led advisory program is another “structural reform” element that middle schools can implement to create a smaller, more personalized environment for students. In such an advisory program, students are paired with an adult advisor who meets with them regularly, serves as an advocate, and helps them with social skills, academic and career issues, and health and ethical issues. In addition to one-on-one meetings, students meet in a small group led by their common advisor.

Four of the 11 Illinois Turning Points schools have advisory programs. Approximately half of the teachers involved report that advisory programs meet *daily* and another third report that they meet *several times a week*. Half of teachers indicate that the length of each advisory meeting is between *16-30 minutes*, while over a third report that they meet for *less than 15 minutes*. The majority of teachers (57%) report that their advisory periods have *less than 25 students*.

Simply implementing a teacher-led advisory program is not enough to impact school climate and student outcomes. Teachers must create an atmosphere of trust and respect with students, and then use the advisory class time to address issues of importance to students. Approximately two-thirds of teachers report that their school uses a combination of elements from commercial and school-based programs for their advisory programs. The most frequently occurring advisory activity is *social skill development*, which occurs *monthly*. *Discussing academic and career issues* as well as *discussing health and ethical issues* are practiced almost *monthly*. Lastly, teachers report that they *meet individually with students* on a *quarterly* basis.

Academic Expectations

Illinois Turning Points students are generally positive regarding their long-term academic expectations. Seventy-three percent believe that they will definitely graduate from high school and 59% believe that they will definitely go to college. Although students are not as sure about their short-term goals (31% believe they will definitely do better in school next year; 25% will definitely make the honor roll next year), an equivalent number of students *speculate* that they will probably do well in the short term. Therefore, 68% of students think that they definitely or probably will do better next year and 47% think they definitely or probably will make the honor roll next year.

Students think their parents' academic expectations either mirror or surpass their own self-expectations. Unfortunately this is not the case with student perceptions of teacher expectations, which are significantly lower than parent or self-expectations. For example, only 49% of the students think their teachers believe they will definitely graduate from high school, compared to 73% for both parent and self-expectations. Although CPRD finds this to be a common trend across schools nationwide, it cannot be ignored; current middle-school research shows students will modify their behavior and performance to match the expectations of their teachers. Student perceptions of their teachers' expectations are therefore very important.

When different populations of Illinois Turning Points Schools are examined, the following trends are observed:

- Students in schools with under 60% FR lunch have higher expectations they will make the honor roll next year, graduate from high school, and go to college.
- Younger students have higher expectations of doing better in school next year, making the honor roll next year, and going to college. Older students, however, are more certain they will graduate from high school.
- Overall, girls have higher academic expectations than boys, and also think their teachers have higher expectations.

Curriculum, Assessments, and Instruction

“Use standards as a basis for curriculum, assessments, and instruction.”

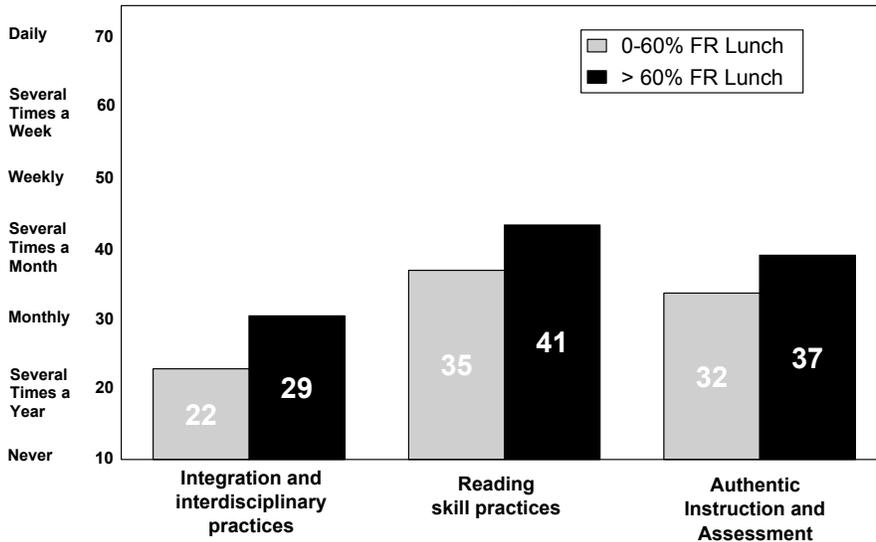
Classroom Practices

Teaming will only carry a school’s reform effort so far, unless it helps the teachers to use more adolescent-friendly classroom practices. The Self-Study therefore measures the frequency of classroom practices, such as the use of *small group active instruction, integration of curricula and interdisciplinary practices, authentic instruction and assessment, critical thinking practices*, and practices to bolster *skills in math, reading, and writing*.

Overall, the practices that Illinois Turning Points teachers engage in most often in their classrooms are *critical thinking practices* and *mathematical skill practices* (between *several times a month and weekly*), which is **unusually high when compared to baseline data CPRD has collected from other schools across the nation. Teachers engage in *citizenship and social competence instruction* just over *several times a month*. Other practices that are occurring *several times a month* are *small group active instruction, reading skill practices, and writing skill practices*. In contrast, the practices that teachers engage in least frequently are *community-based learning opportunities*, occurring *several times a year*, and *use of computers in classes/assignments*, which occurs just over *several times a year*.**

Overall, teachers at schools with over 60% FR lunch students engage in a higher frequency of classroom practices. Notably, half of the classroom practices, (*small group active instruction, integration and interdisciplinary practices, heterogeneous grouping practices, authentic instruction and assessment, citizenship and social competence instruction, and reading skill practices*) are much more frequently practiced in these schools (see Figure 2). This finding matches similar correlations (between lunch status and classroom practices) that CPRD has found in other schools nationwide.

**Figure 2. Illinois Turning Points Schools (2001/02)
Classroom Practices by Lunch Status**



Attitudes on Middle-Grades Practices

Not surprisingly, Illinois Turning Points teachers agree that middle-grade practices are essential to effective education in the grade levels they teach. Overall, positive teacher attitudes is one factor reflected by the frequency of the corresponding classroom instructional practices (other factors include professional development, resources, etc.). In particular, *critical thinking practices*, which teams agree are important, are engaged in the classroom between *several times a month* and *weekly*.

However, there are several inconsistencies between teacher attitudes and the practices they use in their classrooms. Despite agreeing that *integration and interdisciplinary practices* are important, teachers report that they only engage in these practices between *several times a year* and *monthly*. Similarly, *community-based learning opportunities* are only being practiced *several times a year*, even though teachers *agree* it is an essential classroom practice. This inconsistency could be an issue of teachers needing more training or more time to plan and implement new practices.

Achievement Data

Illinois Turning Points schools participate in the Illinois Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT) as a measure of their academic achievement. The ISAT is a series of norm-referenced tests administered in grades seven and eight for middle-school students. The subject matter tested depends on the grade level, as not all subjects are tested every year. For the purposes of this report, the focus will be on eighth grade reading and math scores, which are based on traditional multiple-choice items and extended-response items. The ISAT scoring system includes the following four performance designations: *exceeds standards*, *meets standards*, *below standards* and *academic warning*.

Although teachers report that they engage students in *mathematical skill practices* more frequently than *reading skill practices*, students are performing much higher in the reading section of the ISAT. Half of the students are meeting or exceeding expectations in reading compared to only one-third for the math.

In comparing Turning Points schools with Illinois state averages for all schools, the Turning Points schools are performing at a lower level. Accounting for social inequity, however, gives a different perspective (see Table 1). **Looking at just the Turning Points and Illinois schools with over 60% FR lunch student populations, 27% of students in Turning Points schools are meeting or exceeding expectations in math, compared to only 25% of students in similar Illinois schools.** With regard to reading, 51% of Illinois schools with over 60% FR lunch populations meet or exceed expectations, compared to 46% of Turning Points schools.

Table 1. 2001/02 Math and Reading Scores for Illinois Schools with over 60% Free-Reduced Price Lunch Students

Subject	Turning Points Schools		Other Illinois Schools	
	Meets	Exceeds	Meets	Exceeds
Math	25	2	22	3
Reading	44	2	48	3

Note: $N = 7$ for Turning Points schools, $N = 447$ for Illinois schools.

Within the Turning Points sample, schools with the lowest achievement test scores are those with high percentages of FR lunch students, demonstrating that social inequity continues to exist among Illinois students.

Teachers

Staff Development Participation

Overall, teacher participation in professional development activities in Illinois is relatively low. Teachers indicate, on average, the most frequent activity that they participate in occurs more than *several times a year*, but less than *quarterly*. Not surprisingly, the activities that teachers engage in most frequently occur within their own schools, often utilizing their colleagues as resources. These activities include: *exchanging resources/lesson plans, staff development activities at both the team and grade level, and workshops/in-services provided by staff members*, all of which occur approximately *several times a year*.

“Prepare teachers for the middle grades.”

Staff Development Needs

Illinois teachers indicate a high need for additional professional development activities. They desire at least a *moderate amount* of additional training in 18 of the 32 activities on the survey, and between a *little* to a *moderate* amount of training in all of the rest. The top five areas in which staff want the most additional training include: *strategies for teaching broad-range ability levels in the same classroom, reading skill development, working with “at-risk” students, using computers as part of instruction, and working with families to involve them in education*.

When examining professional development by teacher certification credentials, few differences exist in the kinds of professional development teachers participate in or the areas of professional development teachers requested. However, there is a trend of elementary-certified teachers requesting more professional development activities for their highest needs areas and participating more frequently in professional development activities.

Barriers to Implementation

Every school experiences barriers to its reform effort. Fortunately, Illinois Turning Points teachers report few major barriers at their school with regard to implementation of new practices and programs. Teachers report *parents’ lack of concern regarding their children’s education* is their number one *major problem*, which is typical of schools across the country that have participated in the Self-Study. *Lack of time for planning/implementation, lack of team planning time, and lack of materials/resources* complete the top

four barriers (rated as a *moderate* or *major problem*), which again reflects national trends. The good news is that teachers feel they are being *supported by building administrators, teachers, and/or other staff members*.

Democracy

“Govern democratically by all staff members.”

Decision Making

Creating a democratic school community requires the principal and staff to participate in shared decision making to affect student learning. Despite recent calls for a new generation of “transformational leaders” who can share both their vision and decision-making responsibilities with teachers, the transition from centralized decision making to shared decision making has been a slow one, as indicated in the current middle-level literature.

The good news is that Illinois Turning Points teachers report that *individually* they have *decision-making autonomy* and that overall *centralization in decision making* is low. However, teachers also report that their *interdisciplinary decision-making authority* (regarding team practices, school-wide policies and practices, and student performance and assessments) occurs at a lesser degree. This discrepancy would seem to indicate that the structures for shared decision making are not yet fully implemented.

Environment

“Provide a safe and healthy school environment.”

Work Climate

A safe and healthy school environment can be measured in several ways. For example, the Self-Study asks teachers to rate the school’s climate in both the classroom and their overall work environment. In terms of their work climate, teachers report they are *recognized for their contributions* nearly *most of the time*. Other work climate areas (*staff commitment* and a *well-run and organized school*) are reported as occurring slightly less often.

Classroom Climate

As for classroom climate, teachers *agree* that *students initiate positive interactions with the teacher*. Teachers are closer to neither *agree* nor *disagree* when rating all other classroom climate areas (*students are motivated to achieve, students work well together and respect one another, and students are disruptive*).

School Climate

Student reports of their perceptions of school climate are somewhat mixed. Students report that *most of the time* their *teachers engage them in learning* and that *expectations and rules are clear*. However, they also report that *teachers are supportive* only a little more than *sometimes*; and that *discipline is harsh* at a frequency between *sometimes* and *most of the time*. In addition, students report that *student interactions are negative* close to *most of the time*. Lastly, younger students and girls rate their school climate slightly more positively than do older students and boys.

School Safety

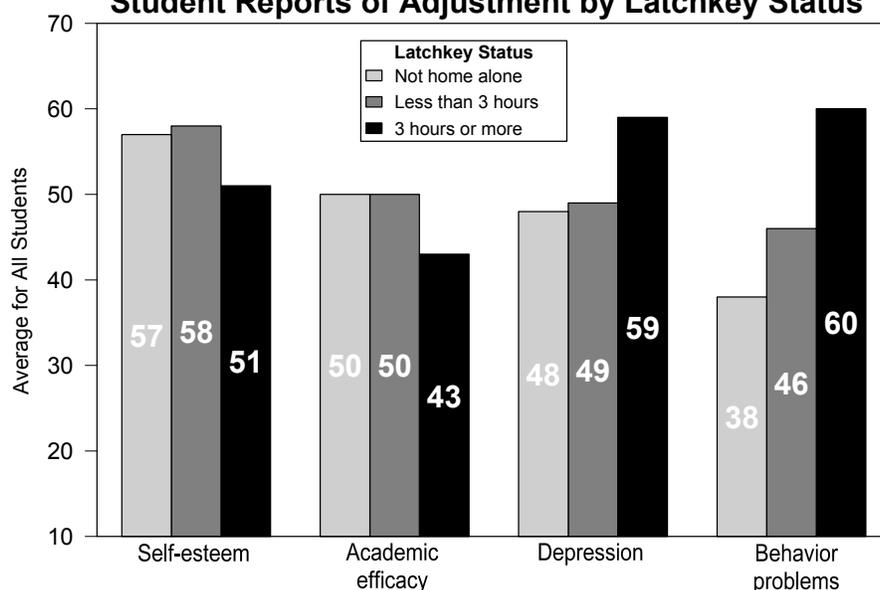
The majority of Illinois Turning Points teachers (89%) and students (78%) report that they feel as safe, or safer, when comparing this year to the previous year. Although there is some fear among teachers (32%) and students (41%) of being hurt while at school, the number of incidences of actual violence is considerably less than the perceived threats. Students report a higher “threat” of violence than teachers, but experience less actual violence (9% for students, 20% for teachers). Ten percent of students report that they brought a weapon to school in order to protect themselves. Fifty-one percent of students report being robbed at school at least once, of which 17% were robbed at least three times or more. Lastly, 20% of students report being offered drugs at school at least once, of which 9% report being offered drugs three or more times.

Student Adjustment

Illinois Turning Points students report higher than average feelings of self-esteem, but relatively average levels of academic efficacy, depression, and behavior problems. Unfortunately, as students get older they report significantly higher levels of behavior problems than younger students. Although boys reported significantly higher behavior problems compared to girls, girls reported higher levels of depression.

However, when students are examined by latchkey status, behavior problems present a “stair-step” pattern in which behavioral problems increase with the amount of time spent alone (see Figure 3). Students who are home alone for more than three hours represent the highest risk. When compared to the national average, these students report significantly higher levels of behavior problems. They also report significantly higher levels of depression, as well as lower levels of academic efficacy. In contrast, students who are not left home alone, or who are left alone for less than three hours report higher than average self-esteem and lower than average levels of depression.

**Figure 3. Illinois Turning Points Schools (2001/02)
Student Reports of Adjustment by Latchkey Status**



Note: These scores are standardized (national self-study average = 50, standard deviation = 10).

Although it might not be practical for all students to have parental supervision at all times after school, minimizing the number of hours left home alone, perhaps with after-school activities or programs, boosts student feelings of academic efficacy while lowering depression and behavior problems.

Discipline

Illinois Turning Points students report that the most frequent form of discipline in their school is being sent to the principal's office. Forty-four percent of students report being sent to the office at least once in the past year for getting into trouble, while 22% report being sent three or more times. In-school and out-of-school suspensions, as a form of discipline, occur far less frequently than trips to the office. Seventeen percent of students report that they received an in-school suspension during the past year, and 13% received an out-of-school suspension

Health Practices

This catch-all category measures risk and protective factors with regard to students' self-care. In terms of **medical care**, 64% of students surveyed report seeing their regular doctor in their doctor's office, while only 10% percent report not having a regular doctor. Only 29% of students reported **eating breakfast** everyday, and 28% report not having breakfast at all during the past week. Half of the students surveyed report spending three or more hours each day **watching TV** or playing computer/video games before or after school.

With regard to **substance abuse**, the substance most often used by students is alcohol. Thirty-six percent of all students have consumed alcohol at least one time during the past month. Cigarette and illegal drug use is not as frequent, but remains a critical issue as 18% of students report smoking cigarettes at least once in the past month and 14% of students have used illegal drugs at least once in the past month. Furthermore, as students get older, their use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs increases. For example, 27% of 6th graders, 32% of 7th graders, and 44% of 8th graders have used alcohol at least once in the past month.

A similar pattern holds true for students based on latchkey status. Forty-five percent of students left home alone for over three hours report having used alcohol at least once in the past month, compared to only 23% of students not left home alone and 35% of students left home for less than three hours.

Parents and Communities

“Involve parents and communities in supportive learning.”

Parent Contact

Since Illinois Turning Points’ teachers report that their number one barrier to implementation of the reform initiative is *parent’s lack of concern regarding their child’s education*, effective parent/teacher contact becomes even more essential. The good news for Illinois Turning Points schools is that teachers report contacting parents *quarterly* regarding the following: *student academic performance, student accomplishments, sending student work home for parent review, homework to do with students, and information on school programs.*

The bad news is that the most frequent parent contact is negative. Teachers report contacting parents between *quarterly* and *monthly* regarding *student behavior problems*. Illinois Turning Points schools also report missing opportunities for *using parents as volunteers*, which only occurs between *once a year* and *several times a year*. A strong parent support group could be the answer, especially for schools lacking sufficient resources (time, money, people).

Family Involvement in Education

Ironically, although middle school is a time when students need parental support the most to help them sort through the turbulent changes they are undergoing, it is also the time that most parents no longer feel welcome or able to participate in their child’s education, both at home and at school. The Illinois Turning Points schools likewise followed this generally observed trend in which students report their family’s involvement in their education occurs only *sometimes*.

Overall, students report that their families are most involved in their education by *checking or helping them with their homework* and by *motivating them to do better in school*. According to

students, both of these activities occur *sometimes*. However, student reports of *engagement in educational activities* occur *hardly ever*.

While there are no significant differences in student reports of family involvement in education when examined by gender, age appears to play an important role. As students get older, the level of family involvement decreases. This finding is most pronounced with the frequency in which families *check or help students with homework*.

Summary

The Illinois Turning Points schools can reflect on the baseline Self-Study data presented in this report as a starting point toward middle-grades reform that supports and guides restructuring to improve student outcomes. The focus of the Turning Points model is on ensuring success for every student learner. The challenge is in creating a learning environment that allows every student to flourish. Interdisciplinary teaming and best practices in the classroom offer students the best opportunity and the capacity for learning.

The good news for Illinois Turning Points schools is that ten of the eleven schools are already teaming—two with high levels of CPT. Overall, the reported teaming practices reflect the average trends that are observed in our national sample, although the frequency of teaming practices is limited by the eight schools teaming with low CPT. The challenge is therefore to get all 11 schools teaming with high levels of CPT.

CPRD's research with middle-grades schools in Michigan demonstrates the positive effects teaming can have on teacher practices and the student learner, especially when combined with high levels of CPT. Michigan teachers that are teaming with high CPT report more *positive attitudes* about best middle-grades practices, higher levels of *team practices* and *classroom practices*, and better *work climate*. Michigan students report more positively on their *socio-emotional adjustment* (lower levels of depression and behavior problems, and higher levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy) and dramatically improved *achievement scores*. An increase in achievement scores is also evident in Michigan schools with high percentages (60% or more) of FR

lunch students, who consistently under-perform their more affluent counterparts.

Two-thirds of the Illinois Turning Points schools also fit this category, and these students are under-performing their Turning Points colleagues at more affluent schools. However, when Turning Points schools with more than 60% FR lunch are matched with a comparable state sample, Turning Points schools surpass the state in math scores and are only five percentage points below the state average in reading. Their success in math may be attributed to the higher-than-average frequency of *mathematical skill practices* reported by teachers. (The frequency of *reading skill practices* and *writing skill practices* are also high, which attributes to their competitiveness with the state average.)

Overall, Turning Points teachers at schools with greater than 60% FR lunch students report a higher frequency of classroom practices than teachers at more affluent Turning Points schools. Although their achievement scores are not as high, if higher classroom practices were coupled with teaming and high CPT, less affluent schools would have the opportunity to compete on a more equal playing field.

In summary, Illinois Turning Points schools are committed to ensuring success for every student. With the teaming structures that are already in place, teachers have been able to make great strides in classroom practices. In particular, teachers at high-risk schools have allowed their students to have competitive achievement scores through increased focus on classroom practices.

Notes:

Providing the Power of Information



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