



Legislative Taskforce Report

The Middle Matters: HM4 Middle School Study Report

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Date: October 16, 2024

The middle school years are a pivotal developmental period for young people, marked by significant academic, social, and emotional changes. During this time, young people also build foundational skills and habits that shape their future success in high school and life, making it essential to provide them with support and opportunities to thrive. Despite the importance of these years, data shows middle school is also when students begin to decline academically, start to miss more school, become disengaged from school environments, and may begin to experience greater mental and emotional challenges. In recognition of the importance of middle school years coinciding with concerning outcomes, lawmakers requested LESC staff study middle school and make policy recommendations on how it can be improved.

House Memorial 4

House Memorial 4 (HM4), sponsored by Representatives Joy Garratt and Yanira Gurrola and signed by the New Mexico House of Representatives during the 2024 legislative session, requested LESC study the structure, curriculum, funding, and design of middle schools and make recommendations on methods and means of enhancing the quality of middle school education in New Mexico. The memorial also requested LESC work with a representative group of youth, including youth that reflect New Mexico's student demographics and student groups named in the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated lawsuit, teacher preparation program leaders, middle school teachers and educational leaders, school counselors and other instructional support providers, school safety and school resource officers, higher education institutions, health professionals, community members, and the Public Education Department (PED).

LESC staff began its work on HM4 with a [landscape review of middle school education](#), presented to the committee in May 2024. This brief defined middle school education, highlighted specific New Mexico statutory information, summarized the developmental needs of middle school learners, and outlined a plan to study middle school education. Following this presentation, staff then formed the HM4 Middle School Taskforce.

This report provides an overview of the membership of the taskforce, the study processes the group engaged in, findings and data reviewed by the taskforce, and recommendations the LESC can consider to improve the quality of middle school education.

Taskforce Members

Members of the taskforce were identified by LESC staff and through nominations by LESC members. LESC staff would like to thank the members of the HM4 taskforce, listed below:

- **Adelynn Ayala**, Seventh Grade Student, Truman Middle School
- **Aiden Brown**, Sixth Grade Student, Janet Kahn School of Integrated Arts
- **Aloryss Ayala**, Seventh Grade Student, Truman Middle School
- **Amanda DeBell**, Deputy Secretary of Teaching, Learning and Innovation, Public Education Department (PED)
- **Amelia Milazzo**, Deputy Director of Identity, Equity, and Transformation, PED
- **Ayla Ayala**, Sixth Grade Student, Truman Middle School
- **Azul Cortés-Quiñonez**, Sixth Grade Student, Washington Middle School
- **Brenda Quiñonez**, Parent
- **Brooke Tafoya**, Behavioral Health Coordinator, Safe and Healthy Schools Bureau, PED

- **Caia Brown**, Parent
- **Daniel Ayala**, Parent
- **Gloria Mendoza**, Executive Director of Strategic Planning and School Support (Secondary), Clovis Municipal School District
- **Kiara Baca**, Eighth Grade Student, Los Lunas Middle School
- **Laurie Erickson**, Education Administrator and Program and Support Specialist, PED
- **Lorraine Archibald**, Educator, Ernie Pyle Middle School
- **Marlon Lavalais, Jr.**, Sixth Grade Student, Rio Rancho Public Schools
- **Michael Rodríguez**, Executive Director, Dual Language Education of New Mexico
- **Michelle Roybal**, Student, Doña Ana Community College
- **Patricia Carden**, Professional Educator and Instructional Coach, New Mexico State University
- **Renee Russ**, Superintendent, Clovis Municipal School District
- **Ria Gill**, Assistant Deputy Director of Special Education, PED
- **Sarah Hager**, Educator and ATF Middle School Vice President, Cleveland Middle School
- **Sharon Roybal**, Parent
- **Soña Saiz**, Behavioral Health Manager, Safe and Healthy Schools Bureau, PED
- **Sue O'Brien**, Executive Director of Student Wellness, Santa Fe Public Schools
- **Todd Lindsay**, Superintendent, Tularosa Municipal School District
- **Tomás Sánchez**, Educator, Washington Middle School
- **Victoria N. Shiver**, Assistant Professor and Undergraduate Program Coordinator of Physical Education Teacher Education, University of New Mexico
- **Will Hawkins**, Superintendent, Silver Consolidated Schools
- **Zane Rosette**, Executive Director, Native American Community Academy
- All LESC members were invited to join any meeting of the taskforce, and the following lawmakers joined in this work: **Representative Joy Garratt**, **Representative Yanira Gurrola**, and **Representative Brian Baca**

The taskforce was staffed by: Gwen Perea Warniment, Director; John Sena, Deputy Director; Jessica Hathaway, Senior Policy Analyst II; and Uxue Sansinena, Intern and High School Student. LESC staff members Alonzo Baca, Tim Bedeaux, and Conor Hicks also assisted with staffing the convenings of the taskforce.



Study Questions and Process

Key questions set out in the HM4 research plan (See **Attachment A: HM4 Research Plan**) included:

1. What are the models of middle school environments being used across New Mexico; How and in what ways do these align with research and best practices on middle school design?

2. What is the relationship between various middle school designs (kindergarten through eighth grade schools, sixth through eighth grade schools, sixth grade academies, junior high schools, etc.) and student outcomes (in available data)? If there are differences, what are the key drivers?
3. What are the articulated needs of middle school students and educators and how does middle school design align to these needs?
4. What is a plausible statewide policy approach to support middle school students? How can the Legislature support middle school environments that enable student success?

To study these questions, the HM4 Middle School Taskforce held two virtual meetings and one full-day in-person meeting at the New Mexico State Capitol. LESC staff also completed a thorough research review and analysis of data to complement the work of the taskforce, including a memo about student needs in middle school written by an LESC intern who is a current high school student.

Meeting One. At the first meeting, held July 30, 2024, taskforce members identified their most pressing concerns about middle school education. Taskforce members also spent time in breakouts responding to three questions: 1) What are the unique needs of middle school students; 2) What does a successful middle school structure look like (from the viewpoint of administrators, educators, students); and 3) Is funding sufficient to develop successful middle school models? These responses were captured and thematically analyzed by LESC staff (see **Attachment B: Thematic Summary** for a full review of responses).

Meeting Two. The second meeting, held August 15, 2024, was informed by responses to the first meeting. LESC staff presented a summary of findings from the first meeting, heard a presentation about middle school models and national research, and learned from Clovis Municipal Schools about their sixth grade academy approach.

Middle School Summit. The full-day middle school summit, held September 5, 2024, included LESC staff presentations about funding and student outcomes, a student panel, student-led envisioning of ideal middle school environments, presentations from four members of the taskforce, and a working session to identify and prioritize policy considerations.



Findings and Responses to Research Questions

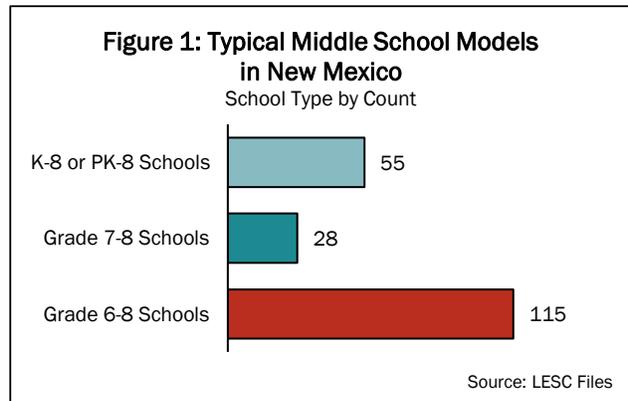
Middle School Grade Configurations

The first research question assesses models of middle school being used across New Mexico and exploring how, and in what ways, these might align with research and best practices in middle school design. National research finds “typical” configurations of middle school grades fall into one of three main types:

1. Kindergarten or prekindergarten to grade eight schools;
2. Grade six through eight schools; or
3. Grade seven and eight schools.

Figure 1: Typical Middle School Models in New Mexico shows analysis of New Mexico data that finds, of these typical configurations, the most common model used in New Mexico is a classic middle school that serves grades six through eight in a standalone school building (N = 115). Data shows there are also 55 schools that are either prekindergarten or kindergarten through grade eight schools. Schools that serve only grades seven or eight are less common, with 28 schools identified as serving these grades only.

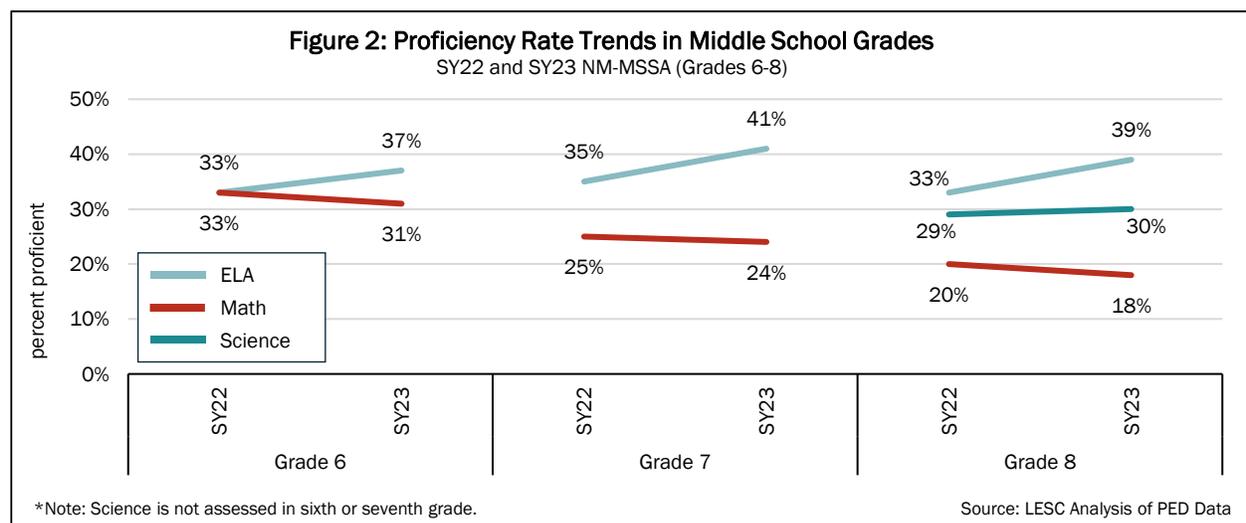
Students in middle grades also show up in many models outside of these typical structures. Review of statewide data finds a wide range of additional models such as schools serving prekindergarten or kindergarten through sixth grade (N = 83), schools serving only sixth grade (N = 3), and schools that serve every grade in their school district (prekindergarten or kindergarten all the way through high school) in a single school building (N = 16), among others. These configurations are consistent with national research finding communities serve middle grades in a variety of settings. Perhaps due to New Mexico’s rural nature, however, there are a fair number of schools that serve a larger number of students in one building (for example, a community may have one school for prekindergarten or kindergarten through eighth grade and another for a classic high school serving grades nine through 12), with it being more feasible from an operational cost and capital outlay perspective for very small districts to consolidate costs as much as possible. It does not appear New Mexico is atypical compared with other states, however, in the type of varying middle school models it has.



Middle School Outcomes and Drivers in Varying Configurations

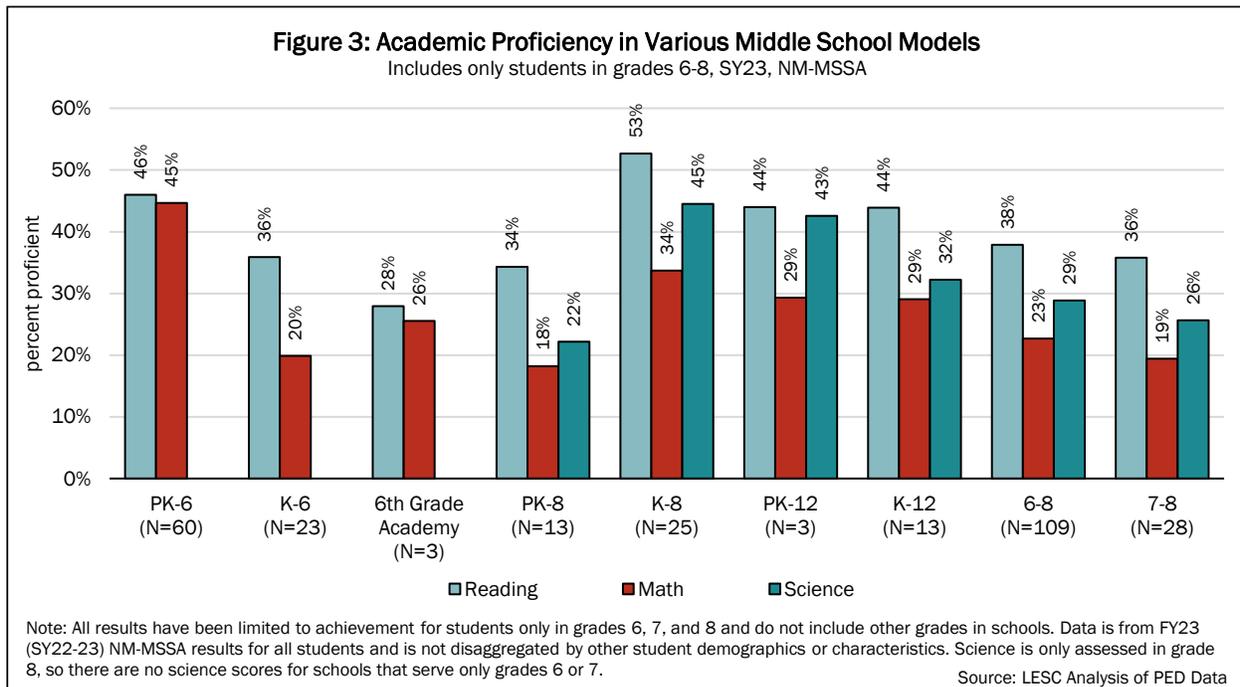
The second research question studied by the HM4 taskforce assesses if there is a relationship between various middle school grade configurations and student outcomes in available data, and if there are differences, what the key drivers of these may be.

Achievement Outcomes. As shown in **Figure 2: Proficiency Rate Trends in Middle School**, analysis of FY23 average statewide achievement data shows the percent of students demonstrating proficiency in reading remains somewhat steady across sixth through eighth grade, with a slight peak in seventh grade, but math scores decline substantially. In FY23 achievement results, analysis finds 31 percent of sixth students demonstrated proficiency in math, but for eighth grade students that same year, just 18 percent demonstrated proficiency.



While these assessments are for different cohorts of students, there is still a trend of math declining across middle grades. Math continues to decline, with high school proficiency being even lower statewide (15 percent in grade 11). In general, middle school years appear to be a crucial time to intervene, particularly in math education.

While statewide averages show one picture of academic achievement, the taskforce also explored academic outcomes in various middle school models offered in New Mexico. **Figure 3: Academic Proficiency in Various Middle School Models**, shown below, demonstrates different achievement scores in math, reading, and science found in various types of school environments serving middle school students.



Across all models, reading proficiency consistently outpaces math and science, consistent with statewide trends in all grades. The highest reading proficiency is found in schools serving kindergarten through eighth grade students (53 percent), while math scores are generally lower, with prekindergarten through sixth grade schools showing the highest math proficiency (45 percent). Science proficiency, assessed only for eighth grade, aligns more closely with math, with notable differences depending on the school model.

- Smaller and less common school configurations with the smallest sample sizes, such as schools serving prekindergarten through eighth grade (N = 25) or only sixth grade (N = 3), show more variability in outcomes. For example, for the three schools serving only sixth grade, analysis finds relatively high average reading proficiency (44 percent) but lower results in math (28 percent) and science (26 percent). These trends suggest specialized models may face unique challenges, or their programs may be more tailored, producing distinct outcomes—in this case, perhaps implementing strong literacy programs that build on elementary level learning.
- More common models with the largest sample sizes, such as a classic sixth through eighth grade middle school (N = 109), tend to show more balanced, but moderate, proficiency levels, which might suggest more stability in the results when there are more data points being analyzed.
- Models that mix middle school grades with younger grades show more variation in proficiency levels, possibly due to the challenge of addressing the needs of a broader age range. However, these configurations also seem to perform better in reading, indicating the possible benefits of sustained literacy programs over time. Similarly, schools that span early childhood all the way through high school

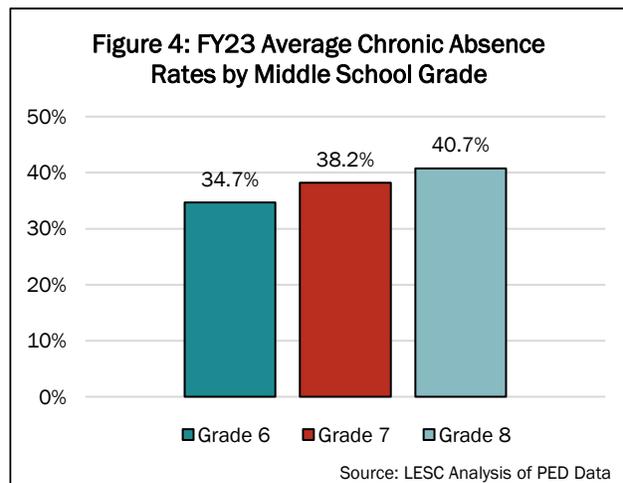
(the prekindergarten or kindergarten through grade 12 schools, total N = 16), exhibit similar proficiency across all academic subjects (around 30 to 45 percent), which could be due to continuous and stable environments.

In summary, these outcomes likely reflect a combination of structural factors (such as grade configuration), instructional focus (with literacy often prioritized, consistent with both policy choices, state findings, and national trends), and the challenges inherent to math and science education found nationwide. Schools with broader age ranges may provide more continuity and consistent support, while smaller or specialized models may face unique challenges that affect their overall proficiency rates.

Discussion of Findings. The reasons for these different outcomes are not fully understood. [National research](#) does not favor one configuration of middle school grades over another, with research on this topic being limited and sometimes finding conflicting results. Still, [research](#) shows families may favor models that are kindergarten or prekindergarten through eighth grade, and a widely held belief persists that limiting transitions and keeping students in one stable environment for longer might ease the challenges associated with middle school. As Education Northwest, an organization that conducts education evaluations nationwide, writes, however, “no particular grade configuration is the “magic bullet” to improving student achievement.” Rather, it is more important to understand specific school attributes and programmatic choices and continually assess outcomes over time, which might be best accomplished through more data monitoring, nuanced qualitative research, and greater disaggregation in available data. Some factors that could be contributing to these findings, and that future research should address, include:

- Curriculum and instruction choices such as specific materials used and teaching strategies employed, specifically by subject area.
- Resource allocation including funding, teacher support and experience, and classroom materials that might impact the quality of the school day for students and, in turn, impact their outcomes positively.
- Student demographics and characteristics (such as socioeconomic status, special education needs, or community demographics, such as rural or urban contexts) may also shed additional light on which models seem to work for various students.
- Longitudinal review of data that tracks more than one year of achievement might reveal how proficiency evolves across school years and whether certain middle school models routinely produce different student outcomes.
- School climate and engagement might include assessing factors such as student engagement and relationships and how these impact student outcomes.

Attendance Outcomes. The taskforce also assessed chronic absence rates by grade, finding chronic absenteeism tends to increase between sixth and eighth grade. **Figure 4: FY23 Chronic Absence Rates** shows in FY23, chronic absence was at 34.7 percent in sixth grade and 40.7 percent in eighth grade, an increase of 6 percentage points. School level data was not available for review, but there was consensus in the taskforce that school leaders and practitioners see a decline in school attendance as students progress through middle school years. This rising absenteeism as students progress may also lend itself to lowering achievement levels seen across middle school.

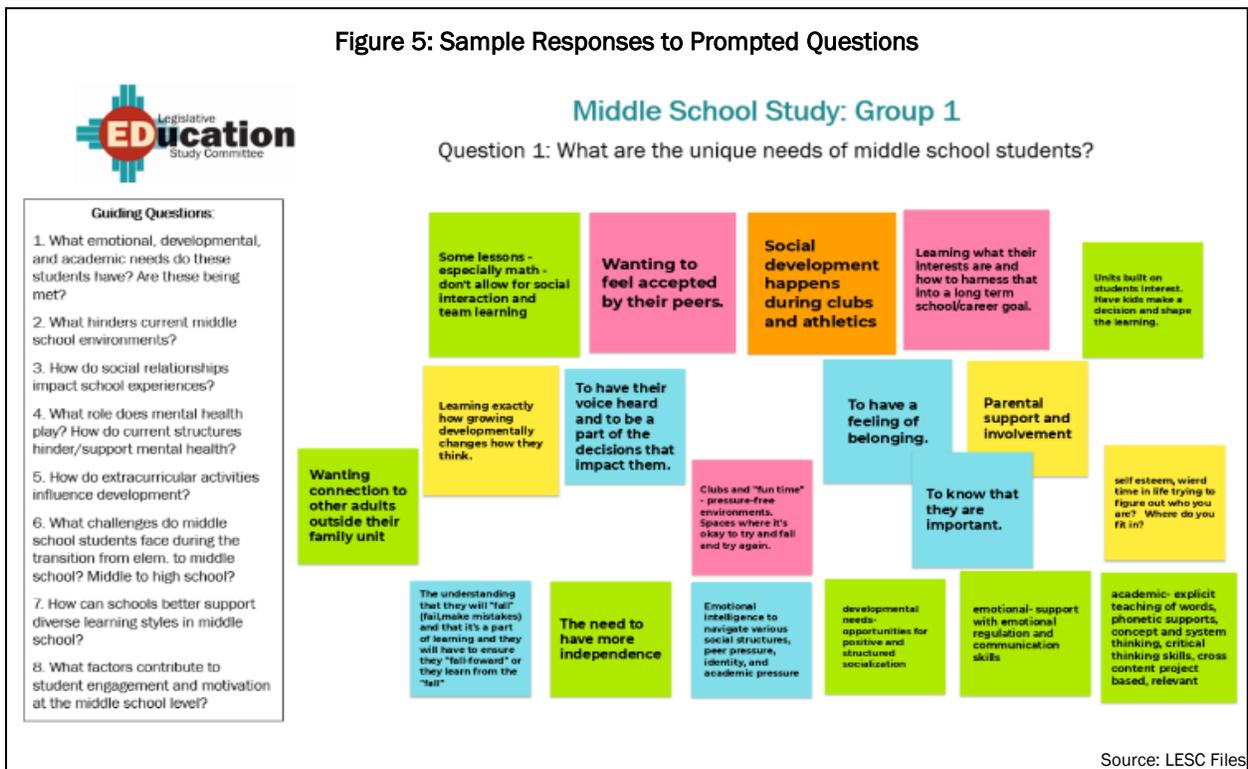


Additional Outcomes. While this review assesses outcomes in two variables (achievement and attendance) for which there is available data, both the taskforce and LESC staff recognize there are additional outcomes that are important. For example, assessing mental health, engagement in school environments, and social and emotional well-being lends additional insight into how middle school students are faring. The 2021 New Mexico Middle School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, for example, found 27.5 percent of middle school students surveyed had seriously thought about committing suicide and 28.4 percent indicated that their mental health was “poor” either most of the time or always. This survey also shows worsening mental health across the middle school continuum with 23.8 percent of sixth grade students reporting poor mental health compared with 29.1 percent of seventh grade students and 31.4 percent of eighth grade students. New Mexico has recently conducted a social and emotional well-being survey, known as the Panorama survey, but results from this survey have not yet been made available to LESC staff for review, although these are available to school leaders.

Articulated Needs and Alignment

The third research question asked LESC staff and the taskforce to identify the articulated needs of middle school students and educators and determine if middle schools in New Mexico align to those needs. To speak directly to this question and compliment national and state research on middle school, the taskforce included several middle school educators and professionals alongside middle school students themselves. This question was explored in numerous ways:

1. The taskforce responded to prompted questions as part of structured breakout groups in the taskforce’s first meeting that were then thematically analyzed (See **Figure 5: Sample Responses to Prompted Questions** for a sampling of this work and **Attachment B: Thematic Summary** for a full summary of the responses);
2. Students participated in a panel discussion at the taskforce’s in-person Middle School Summit to elevate their needs and identify what is both working, and not working, about their schools; and



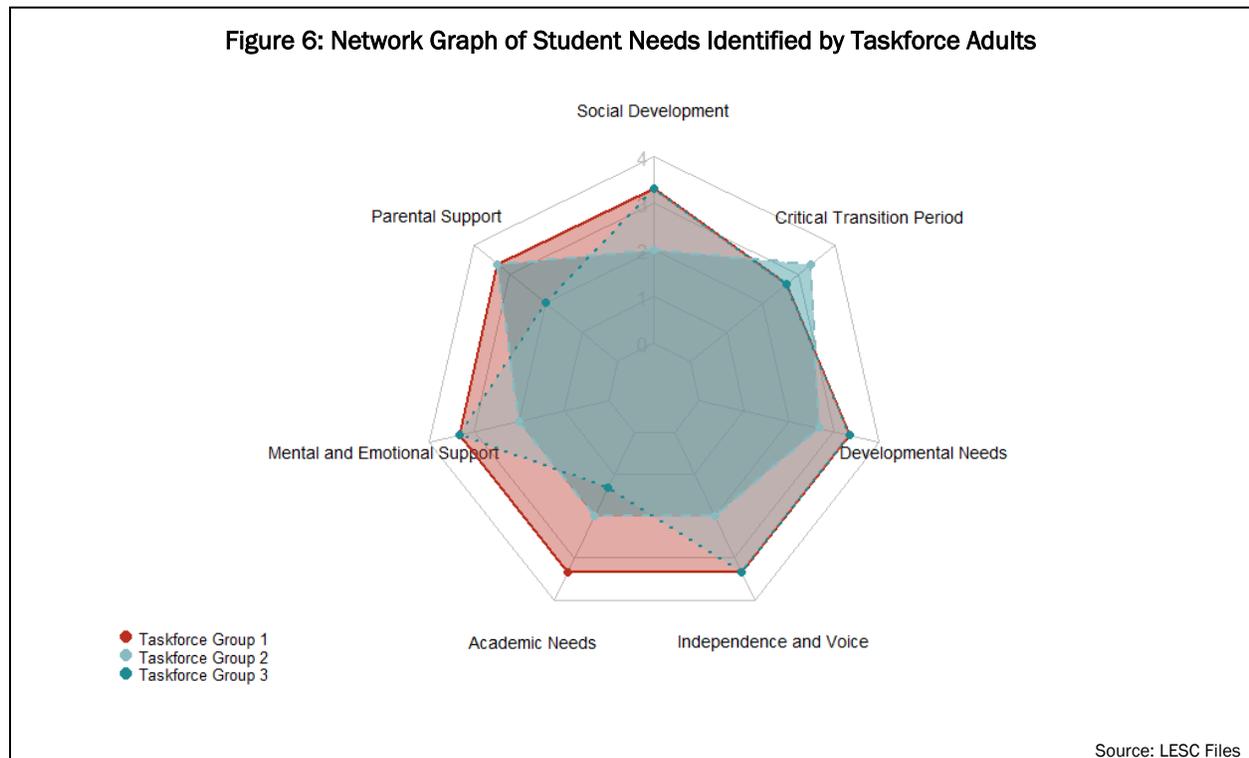
3. The taskforce participated in a student-driven question and answer session to design a “dream school” and responses were captured by LESC staff for both adult and student members of the taskforce. These were then assessed for similarities and differences in responses. See **Attachment C: Student Responses to “Dream School”** and **Attachment D: Adult Responses to “Dream School”** for documentation of the insights offered by the taskforce members.

Through this robust process, the taskforce was able to identify numerous needs and potential solutions to these, using both best-practices research and their own experiences to inform their suggestions.

Summary of Student Needs as Identified by Adults

As displayed in **Figure 6: Network Graph of Student Needs**, a network display of key themes derived from taskforce member insights about student needs, there was strong consensus about student needs, even when the group was split into breakouts. Thematic analysis revealed consistency in seven themes:

1. **Social Development:** Reflected in growing needs for peer acceptance, emotional intelligence, and navigating social pressures. Clubs, extracurriculars, athletics, and social relationships are seen as important venues for social growth.
2. **Critical Transition Period:** Challenges of transitioning from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school were emphasized, with role models and support during transitions seen as essential.
3. **Developmental Needs:** Middle school students are at a key developmental stage, dealing with self-esteem issues and identity development, and social media playing an increased role.
4. **Independence and Voice:** Middle school students seek independence and a say in decisions affecting them. Members noted the importance of creating environments where students can try and fail safely.
5. **Academic Needs:** Explicit teaching of critical thinking, phonetic supports, and relevant project-based learning were noted, alongside a need to focus on more specialized subjects (math) begins to emerge.



6. **Mental and Emotional Support:** Anxiety, depression, and mental health are prevalent issues and there is a need for emotional support to help students manage these challenges.
7. **Parental Support:** Parents' involvement is crucial, though it tends to diminish in middle school. Students balance still needing their families while also building independence. Ensuring schools are accessible and inclusive for families (via language and cultural responsiveness) was noted as key in partnering.

In a network graph, the more overlapping area of topics, the more consistent the findings are. As Figure 6 shows, significant overlap exists, signaling there is strong consensus about the needs of middle grade students, which can offer insight into the mechanisms and areas that might be most important to center recommendations around.

Student Voice

Eight students joined the taskforce once the school year started and were present for a full-day meeting in September 2024. At this meeting, students offered insights about their experiences in school and participated in identifying what they both like and dislike about school.

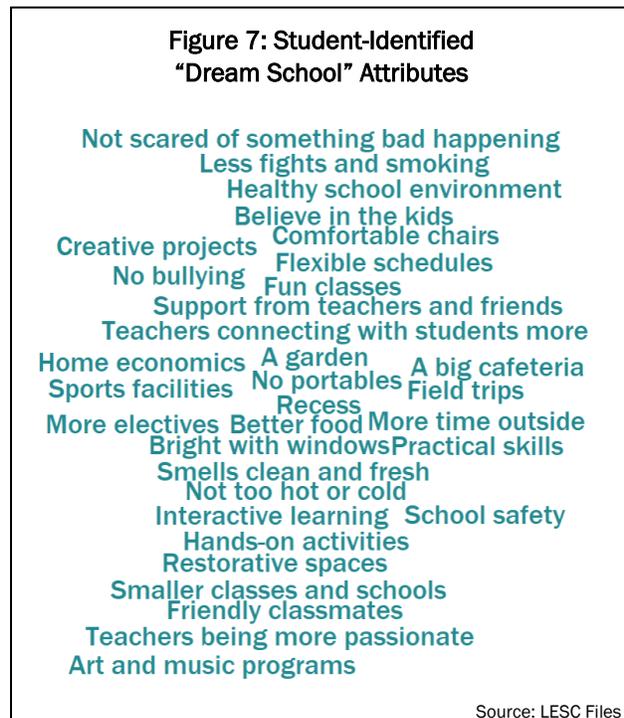
Students overwhelmingly reported school safety as their major concern. School safety became the one item with consensus across the entire group of students for its importance to them. Students expressed fears about “something bad happening” and also identified situations around bullying, school violence (such as fights in hallways), vaping at school, a lack of close friends, and more desire for close relationships with teachers to feel safer.

Students also expressed significant interest in being able to take elective classes—such as art, theater, music, and athletics—while also pointing out various ideas for what they wish school actually looked, felt, and sound like. **Figure 7: Student-Identified “Dream School” Attributes**, consolidates ideas offered by students as the items that would most improve their middle school experience, largely because these attributes are not present in their various school experiences.

See **Attachment C: Dream School (Students)** and **Attachment D: Dream School (Adults)** for review of all ideas offered by both students and adults about what they would like middle schools to ideally look like.

Discussion of Findings. The taskforce found many ideas about middle school reform are well acknowledged in both research and practical understanding of what should be happening in classrooms. Despite knowing what transformation could and should look like, members noted a disconnect between the ideal and the reality. Many middle schools today still do not reflect the environments that educators and students desire.

Rather, many students report feeling overwhelmed by academic and social pressures, rushing in the school day to complete their work, and not having sufficient access to learning opportunities outside of core academic subjects. Educators expressed a strong desire to collaborate and offer more interdisciplinary learning, but said systemic barriers—such as rigid instructional time requirements, overwhelming administrative duties, and insufficient planning time—make it nearly impossible to implement these practices. There are promising exceptions, such as Clovis Municipal Schools’ “Sixth Grade Academy” that has centered student, family, and community voice in its design. In this model, sixth graders are put into smaller cohorts, attend longer courses that are offered in a block schedule, and the district has also created an athletics program and expanded elective

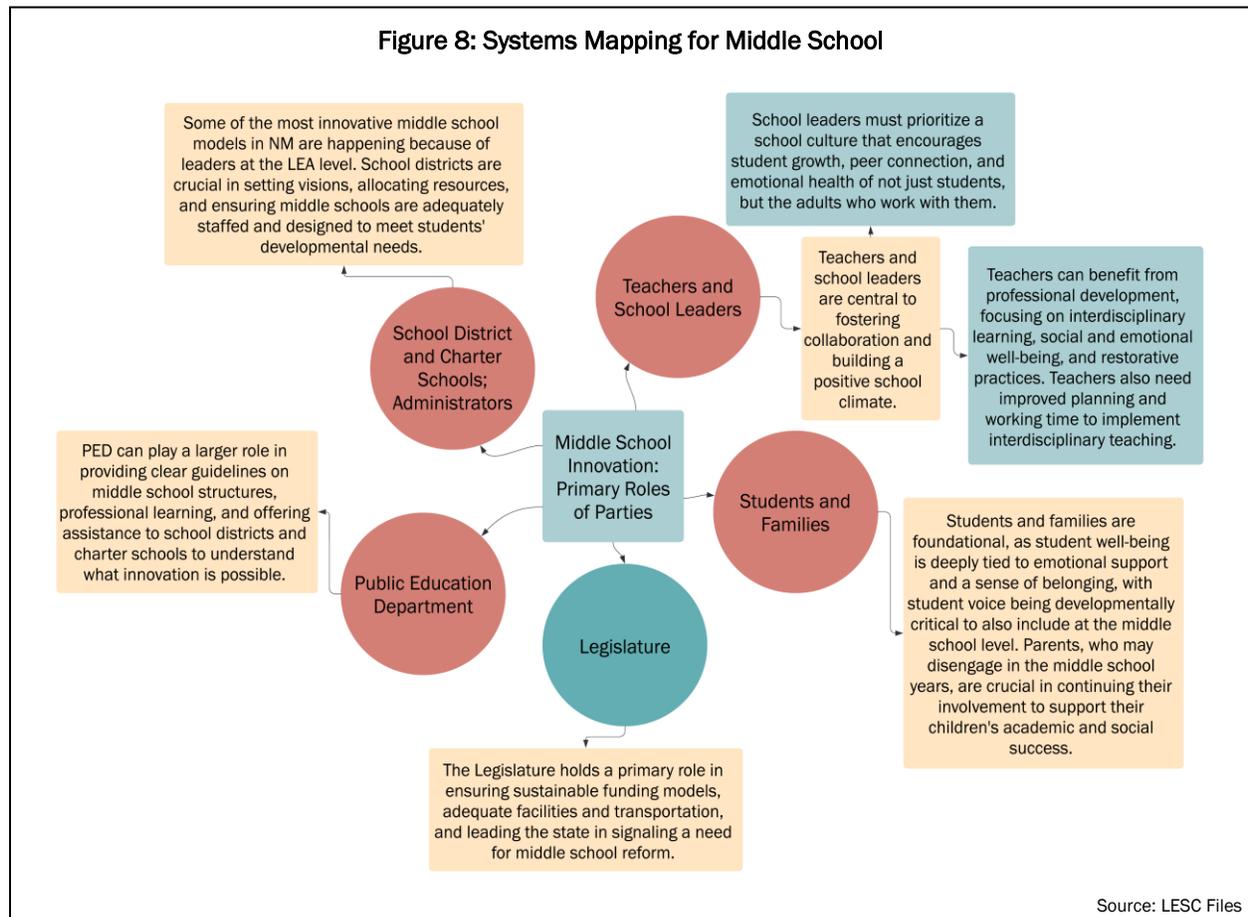


options for its Sixth Grade Academy students. Still, the district has faced hurdles in making sure the building’s infrastructure works to support these structures, and it has had to be creative in staffing to ensure the ability to offer robust electives and genuine interdisciplinary teaching.

Ultimately, the taskforce concluded that while change may be technically feasible under current structures, it remains burdensome and poorly aligned with other demands. Without more intentional efforts, greater alignment of state law, administrative rule, and corresponding sustained funding mechanisms—as well as school leadership fully understanding how to braid and leverage these factors—reform efforts risk being fragmented and difficult to sustain.

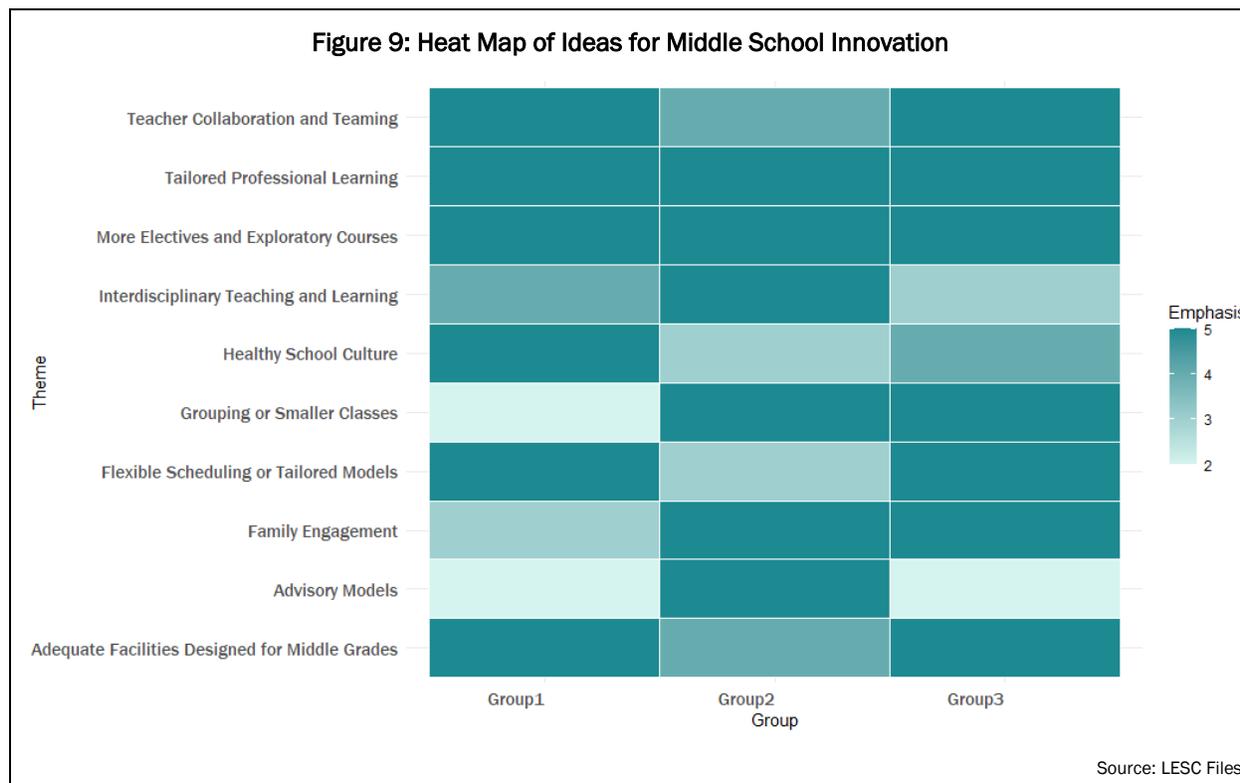
Policy Approach

Research question four asked LESC staff and the taskforce to determine a plausible statewide policy approach to support middle school students and to identify the Legislature’s role in this work. As shown in **Figure 8: Systems Mapping for Middle School**, a comprehensive policy framework to transform middle schools requires the collaboration of all stakeholders and coordinated efforts across multiple levels of the education system. Each group within the education system must align its efforts to drive meaningful, lasting change.



As **Figure 9: Heat Map of Ideas for Middle School Innovation** displays on the next page, there are also clear ideas, and consensus on these ideas, identified by the taskforce that could improve middle school environments for both students and educators. Review of the taskforce’s ideas and comparison with national research shows these are evidence-based ideas tied to improved student outcomes at the middle school level. While not all of

these require statutory change, and many are possible at the local level, the taskforce members still felt a statewide vision, underlying capacity, funding, and appropriate infrastructure are necessary ingredients the Legislature can support to make local level innovation more feasible and impactful.



Recommendations and Mechanisms

This report closes with legislative recommendations the LESC can consider, aligned with identified needs and system mapping for how the Legislature can play a role in driving transformation in middle school.

The Legislature could:

- **Consider adding sixth grade to the secondary basic program unit factor** in the state equalization guarantee (SEG), the state’s public school funding formula. This could drive additional resources to middle school education environments to address concerns about sufficient staffing and supports needed in middle school years. Currently, students in grades four through six have a cost differential factor of 1.045 in the SEG and students in grades seven through 12 have a cost differential factor of 1.25. The specific grades that fall into each factor were last adjusted in 1974, at a time when junior high schools for grades seven and eight were more common and sixth graders were typically educated in the same environments, and with the same practices (such as a single educator in a room of students) as elementary students. Since 1974, the national understanding of middle school educational needs has shifted substantially. The most common model of middle school education in New Mexico places sixth graders in buildings alongside seventh and eighth grade students, yet they generate less funding.
- **Consider expanding career and technical education (CTE) funding** to middle school environments to allow for more hands-on, practical learning that is age-appropriate, but begins to build career exploration activities into the state’s CTE continuum that accelerates in high school.

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- **Continue funding for attendance, social and emotional learning, math, and mental and behavioral health supports** given the academic and social outcomes seen among middle school students.
 - **Consider requiring a middle school specific educator and leadership preparation pathway or license, as well as supporting ongoing professional learning** that trains these educators in competencies specific to middle school students.
 - **Consider defining middle school in state law.** As a definition for “middle school” does not currently exist, although it does in administrative rule and “junior high” is defined, this might be considered technical clean up since the term is used throughout the Public School Code. It might also allow for clear and uniform guidelines on middle school structures and the purpose of middle schools. This clarity might also allow policymakers to tailor funding, staffing, and programmatic support specific to middle school needs and a legal definition might also empower school districts and charter schools to adopt best practices.

The Public Education Department could:

- **Consider offering greater technical assistance and learning for middle school educators** that focuses on the skills, knowledge, and competencies uniquely needed to support students in this age group that may be distinct from other grades and ages.
- **Consider directing targeted allocation of funding** (such as attendance and math appropriations) **to middle school environments** to interrupt the emergence of concerning outcomes seen in middle grades.
- **Create structures to share best practices in middle schools statewide.** Many members of the taskforce noted there are not avenues to learn from other school leaders or educators, which they feel could be beneficial in improving their practices and understanding of what innovation is possible.

School Districts and Charter Schools could:

- **Consider forming learning communities to better share resources, ideas, and leadership practices** that are improving middle school education. As noted earlier in this report, much of the most transformational work around middle school is happening at the school district and charter school level, with school leaders who understand what is possible in current statutory and regulatory frameworks creating significant change in their local school communities. What is missing, however, is a clear way to share this learning.
- **Ensure they are reviewing middle school data in a disaggregated way—across grades and student demographics—to drive programming, resource allocation, and middle school reform** initiatives to the groups of their students that would benefit most.
- **Talk with their students and families to authentically engage them in redesigning middle school efforts.** Given the developmental needs of middle school students, student voice is particularly important to make sure schools are responsive. Finding ways to authentically include student perspective and continue to engage parents is crucial for offering developmentally appropriate middle school education.
- **Leverage the graduate profile development process, and revisions to Next Step Plans,** created by House Bill 171 (HB171) from the 2024 legislative session that changes high school graduation requirements, to improve community and family informed school reform. While HB171 is specific to high school, the development of graduate profiles can inform not only high school efforts, but broader school district and charter school strategic plans, particularly in aligning middle school efforts in a way that ensures readiness for high school. Graduate profiles are also ideally developed in partnership with students, families, community members, workforce, and other partners identified by school districts and charter schools—this process could be leveraged to inform middle school redesign as well. Further, Next Step Plans are required beginning in eighth grade and are bolstered by HB171’s updates to graduation requirements.



Date: May 17, 2024
Prepared By: Hathaway

Attachment A: Middle School Study Research Plan

Overview and Background

- In response to House Memorial 4, signed during the 2024 legislative session, and in response to the crucial role middle school plays in transitioning students between elementary and high school, LESC staff will conduct a comprehensive study of middle school during the 2024 interim.
- This research plan includes key questions for investigation and research, outlines anticipated membership in the study group, and details the anticipated timeline for producing a final report for LESC members.

Rationale

- As the pivotal transitional phase between elementary and high school, middle schools play a crucial role in shaping students' academic, social, and emotional development. However, existing middle school structures often fail to adequately address the needs of adolescents and their educators, evidenced by disengagement, drops in math and reading achievement, challenges with attendance that emerge in middle school, and educator wellbeing. This research aims to evaluate current middle school structures (funding, scheduling, staffing, design) and propose reforms to create more responsive school environments.

Anticipated Membership

- LESC members; A representative group of youth that reflect New Mexico's student demographics and the student groups named in the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated lawsuit; teacher preparation program leaders; middle school teachers and educational leaders; school counselors and other instructional support providers, school safety and school resource officers; higher education institutions; health professionals; community members; and the Public Education Department (PED).

Key Questions for Inquiry

- What are the models of middle school environments being used across New Mexico; How and in what ways do these align with research and best practices on middle school design?
- What is the relationship between various middle school designs (K-8 schools; 6-8 grades; 6th grade academies, etc.) and student outcomes (in available data)? If there are differences, what are the key drivers?
- What are the articulated needs of middle school students and educators and how does middle school design align to these needs?
- What is a plausible statewide policy approach to support middle school students? How can the legislature support middle school environments that enable student success?

Timeline and Outcome

- April – May 2024: Literature review, development of research plan, and forming of working group.
- June – September 2024: Working group meetings, site visits, and drafting of recommendations.
- October 2024: Final report and presentation to LESC.



Attachment B: Thematic Summary

Responses organized by question and group:

Question 1: What are the unique needs of middle school students?

Group 1 Responses:

- **Social Development:**
 - Students want to feel accepted by their peers and develop emotional intelligence to navigate various social structures, peer pressure, and academic pressure.
 - Social development also occurs during clubs and athletics.
- **Independence and Voice:**
 - Students desire more independence and want their voices heard, playing a role in decisions that impact them.
 - Students need environments where they can try, fail, and learn without pressure.
- **Parental Support:**
 - Parental support and involvement are critical during middle school.
- **Developmental Needs:**
 - Middle school students are at a crucial developmental stage, learning how growing changes affect their thinking.
 - Self-esteem is a significant issue, as students are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in.
- **Academic Needs:**
 - Students need explicit teaching of words, phonetic supports, and critical thinking skills.
 - There's a focus on cross-content project-based learning and making learning relevant to students.

Group 2 Responses:

- **Critical Transitions:**
 - Students face critical transitions between elementary and middle school and middle to high school, which are challenging and require support.
 - These transitions happen quickly, and students are often asked to adjust to new structures that differ significantly from their previous experiences.
- **Role Models:**
 - The presence of role models is important for helping students navigate these transitions.
- **Engagement and Community:**
 - Engagement can be improved through bilingual support and activities that help students feel a sense of community.
- **Challenges with Parental Involvement:**
 - Communication with parents is often difficult, and lack of parental involvement makes it hard to solve problems.

Group 3 Responses:

- **Anxiety and Depression:**
 - Many students experience anxiety and depression, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed, which affects their school experience, including attendance.
- **Developmental Differences:**
 - Middle school students are at different developmental stages, and the environment is not always designed to address these varied needs.

Attachment B: Thematic Summary

- **Social Fitting In:**
 - Students are trying to find their group and stay connected socially, which is a significant part of their middle school experience.
 - **Identity Development:**
 - Middle school is a time of significant identity development, where students are trying to figure out who they are in relation to family, friends, and society.
 - Social media plays a role in this identity development.
-

Question 2: What does a successful middle school structure look like?

Group 1 Responses:

- **Elective Opportunities:**
 - More elective opportunities are needed to cater to diverse student interests.
- **Teacher Collaboration:**
 - Teachers need time for preparation and cross-collaboration.
 - Teaching teams, where a group of teachers works with the same students, help in planning interdisciplinary units and getting to know students better.
- **Student Success Centers and Restorative Practices:**
 - Restorative practice coordinators and student success centers at every school are essential for supporting students.
- **Healthy School Culture:**
 - A successful middle school structure involves healthy leadership, school culture, and climate.
- **Flexible Scheduling:**
 - Flexible scheduling and consistent opportunities for students to engage with content outside the classroom are important.

Group 2 Responses:

- **Interdisciplinary Grouping:**
 - Interdisciplinary grouping and teaming of teachers to share the same students are crucial for consistency and integrated learning.
- **Advisory Models:**
 - Advisory models that loop with students are more feasible than traditional family structures.
 - Capstone projects and service learning offer relevance and applied learning.
- **Family Structure Models:**
 - Family structure models, where teachers work with the same students, are easier for teachers and parents to manage, promoting shared expectations.
- **Exploratory Learning:**
 - Exploratory learning opportunities, such as wheels or capstone projects, provide practical, relevant education experiences.

Group 3 Responses:

- **Success with 6th Grade Academies:**
 - The 6th grade academy model has been successful in helping students transition into middle school.

Attachment B: Thematic Summary

- **Family Support:**
 - Family support is strong in elementary school but tends to drop off in middle school, highlighting the need for continuous engagement.
 - **Exploratory Courses:**
 - Exploratory courses taught by content specialists help address diverse learning needs.
 - **Teacher Support Systems:**
 - Successful middle schools provide strong support systems for educators, including wellness spaces and collaborative teams.
 - **Physical Proximity:**
 - Smaller teams of students and physical proximity in classroom transitions contribute to a successful middle school environment.
-

Question 3: Is funding sufficient to develop successful middle school models?

Group 1 Responses:

- **Sustainable Funding for Interventions:**
 - Schools need sustainable funding for interventions and support programs to ensure they are available year after year.
- **Adequate Facilities:**
 - Schools require adequate facilities that reflect the importance of middle school education.
- **Consistent Professional Development:**
 - Ongoing professional development is necessary to maintain high-quality instruction and support.

Group 2 Responses:

- **Adequate Facilities and Staffing:**
 - Schools need adequate facilities and enough FTEs (full-time equivalents) to develop pure teams.
 - There should be ongoing mentoring/coaching for staff and extracurricular activities of all kinds.
- **Flexibility and Responsiveness:**
 - Funding should allow flexibility for sites to be responsive to community needs.
- **Transportation and Extracurricular Activities:**
 - Transportation is important, and there needs to be sufficient funding for extracurricular activities.

Group 3 Responses:

- **Challenges with Staffing:**
 - Staffing and FTE position funds can be challenging, and there's a need for sustainable staffing models.
- **Support Staff:**
 - Alongside teachers, support staff is essential for successful middle school models.
- **Professional Development Concerns:**
 - There are concerns about the quality and sustainability of ongoing professional learning options.
- **Exploratory Programs:**
 - Exploratory programs are more expensive, requiring certified staff in different areas, which adds to the financial burden.

Attachment B: Thematic Summary

Summary by question, across all groups:

Question 1: What are the unique needs of middle school students?

- 1. Social Connection and Acceptance:**
 - Students across all groups emphasize the importance of feeling accepted by their peers and developing emotional intelligence to navigate social and academic pressures. Finding their group and staying connected socially are critical aspects of their middle school experience.
 - 2. Independence and Guidance:**
 - Middle school students desire more independence while still needing significant guidance. They want their voices heard and to be involved in decisions that affect them. This balance between independence and boundaries is a common theme.
 - 3. Emotional and Mental Health Needs:**
 - Anxiety, depression, and mental health challenges are prevalent concerns among middle school students. The need for emotional support, including help with regulation and communication skills, is consistently highlighted.
 - 4. Parental Support and Involvement:**
 - Parental support is seen as crucial, though involvement often diminishes during the middle school years, which can negatively impact students' academic and social experiences.
 - 5. Academic and Developmental Needs:**
 - Students need tailored academic support, particularly during critical transitions between elementary and middle school and from middle to high school. There is a need for explicit teaching, project-based learning, and activities that are relevant and engaging.
 - Developmental changes, including self-esteem issues and the quest for identity, are significant challenges for middle school students, requiring environments that are responsive to these needs.
-

Question 2: What does a successful middle school structure look like?

- 1. Flexible and Supportive Scheduling:**
 - Flexible scheduling, cross-collaboration among teachers, and time for preparation are essential elements of a successful middle school structure. Advisory models that loop with students and interdisciplinary grouping are also highlighted as effective strategies.
- 2. Teacher Collaboration and Teaming:**
 - Collaboration among teachers is critical, with many groups advocating for team teaching, where a group of teachers works with the same students. This approach allows for better planning of interdisciplinary units and stronger student-teacher relationships.
- 3. Student-Centered Learning and Exploratory Opportunities:**
 - Successful middle schools provide more elective opportunities and support exploratory learning through capstone projects, service learning, and other applied learning experiences. Engaging students in practical, relevant content is seen as key to their success.
- 4. Restorative Practices and Support Systems:**
 - Restorative practices and student success centers, as well as wellness spaces and support systems for educators, are essential for creating a positive and effective middle school environment.
- 5. Parental and Community Involvement:**
 - Engaging families and communities in the school structure is vital for student success. Continuous family support, even beyond elementary school, is necessary to maintain strong academic and social outcomes.

Question 3: Is funding sufficient to develop successful middle school models?

1. Sustainable Staffing and Resources:

- There is a consistent concern about the sustainability of staffing and resources. Schools need adequate funding to maintain full-time positions, provide continuous professional development, and support extracurricular activities.

2. Adequate Facilities and Infrastructure:

- Adequate and responsive facilities are necessary to reflect the importance of middle school education. Schools need the flexibility to adapt to community needs, ensuring that infrastructure supports the educational goals.

3. Extracurricular and Support Programs:

- Funding for extracurricular activities, transportation, and support programs is crucial. These activities are seen as essential for engaging students and providing a well-rounded education.

4. Challenges with Professional Development:

- Ongoing professional development is highlighted as a critical need, but there are concerns about the quality and sustainability of available options. Ensuring that educators receive the training they need is essential for maintaining a successful middle school structure.

Good Learning is being engaged and interested in what they are talking/learning. Sometimes you learn good with your friend and sometimes not.

Good learning - paying attention to the topic to understand it

What is good Learning

Good learning is being able to choose on what and how to learn.

Azul
😊

Good learning is when you understand what the material is and take what you learn in your life. Working with people adds to this and helps you learn better. Good work is when you put effort into it and make it a point to remember the material.

good learning is learning clearly about something you might've not known before and to understand it more than before. And to be interested.

If I Azul were to
change my school,
I would like to
add lockers and bigger
classrooms. I would
also add better chairs.


No Bullying Free
A Big choir room with a lot of
singing
A Big Actor's classroom
for the actors and lots dancing
to and ASL classroom for
and special ed classroom

I would also make
the building bigger
for more ~~open~~ open
space in the hallways


Friends help me with my
Math it's a real good
learning they're teaching
me to learn realted
math answers

No Expired Food or Drinks
Check the expiration dates
that the kids won't get sick
including the whole school
To believe in your kids
Don't call them a liar

School would feel like a safe environment where kids don't have to be scared of something bad happening.

- Good Grades
- Reading for 1 hour
- And trying to solve math.

School would look like big with open spaces like instead of traditional classrooms we can go outside and work.

Friends help me learn better

sound like kids having fun but at the same time. Learning

I would want my students to feel safe and for their parents to be sure they are sending their students to a safe school without it being shot up because it is very easy to get a gun. And I know multiple of my peers have a handgun or many guns.

more on this

I would

Adelum

Classes

More activities outside
and a garden

and I would like
to have a bigger
campus mostly
outdoor stuff

With tall ceilings

I would like to
have a ~~shit~~ cold
classroom

With bright ~~like~~
lights

I would like it
Adelum to be
silent

I would want
to have a building
dedicated to electives
and no [portables]

and classes

like
garden
home ec

Adelum

It would have a ~~flag~~
~~in~~ in the front ^{fountain}
with the name
of the school.

~~I would have some like~~
there would be
music playing in
classrooms.

It would feel like
like school.

I would like to have
fountains or ponds

I would want it to
smell fresh

Adelum

The people in my school would be supportive and open to helping their students.

I would also make sure they had good lunches. Have a lot of elective classrooms. It would be nice if it had a lot of windows instead of harsh light. A garden would be cool.

If I would build a new school from the ground up it would be spacious. There would be other pieces to teach, like outdoor classrooms or kitchens and stuff like that. There would also be a lot of opportunity to be outside & have fun.

Attachment C: Student Responses to "Dream School"

- rebuild our old pods to look more new and exciting as our current ones are very bare and almost look like a prison
- Allow music to listen to while working to focus better
- have more community and activities
- less fights, bullying, smoking, violence

• redesign the pods as the halls get very crowded and some pods have 4 different classrooms but only one door to exit

- put in maybe a lab, or a kitchen which we formally had
- There being less people as the population is huge.

Opportunities to have classes/electives outside
~~maybe a free~~ always want a free period to catch up on work
seating
~~venting machines~~
sound like kids enjoys
feel like kids are
~~safe and~~ safe

• Not having to be on our pods all day and look at a screen so much

- teachers connecting more with students regarding school but also outside of it
- more fun being incorporated into our learning
- Teach more about stuff that we will actually need in our lives as an adult
- Better school lunches that children enjoy.

• Teachers being more passionate about what they teach and love what they do

- Having staff who I am close with on campus more
- Allowing late start at least one day a week like at the high school
- New fields
- more field trips and hands on learning

Voice &
Choice on
Learnings

Community
(Teachers,
Parents, Kids)
meet to plan
and organize
environment
MISSION + VISION

— Warm
&
NOT FUN
Isolated
Community
Teachers
Parents
Students

++
+ Rooms
Designed
for Learning
* OPEN
- outdoor
*

* Learning for
all is
real life +
engaging
students
teachers

- New building * windows
- Working AC/heating
- Well maintained campus
- Additional support staff
- More afterschool programs (Bus)
- ↑ Counselors
3 → Now 1

- smaller class sizes
- Additional parental involvement
- A study hall?

my dream school
would have community
services, holistic learning,
outdoor learning spaces
youth leadership, project
based learning, community
impact - block scheduling
2 preps, set ^{curriculum} _{restorative justice}

✓ additional elect
✓ rest. practice
✓ Wellness st. + t.
✓ Funding for educ + st
adequate fac

advisory collab.
alt. lng. family comm.
PD.

- Accessible ^{new} technology
- flexible learning spaces +
furniture
- SEL options ^{supports} spaces/methods
- Relaxing "hang out" spaces
- Upgraded library/media spaces
- Internship/application of skills
in real-life situations
- Collaborative, student-led activities

Lots of electives
and activities that
interests kids

Class schedule to
connect with
kids

Tutoring learning
centers

Cafeteria Redesign

Connect learning
to real world.

CTE

Study skills note
talking organization

access to high
school + college
courses

Well furnished +
physically appealing

Student centered

Start times ?

- More
- Counselors; at least one per grade level
- Have EA's in MS classrooms to help teachers
- more community engagement events w/ teachers, staff, families & community members

More Music
More Energy
Family Atmosphere
Themed Rooms
Ron Clark
Academy

- Include students in school leadership and administration & decision making
- Embed culture and language in foundational curricula
- "Normalize" SEL in MS

- Open Spaces; outdoor learning; play areas
- Life learning opportunities/electives (finance/budgeting/home ec. gardening/farming)
- community work spaces for group or collective learning

SOUND

- * play - breaks, lunch & passing period
- * ↳ more sports opportunities
- * Student presentations
↳ videos

LOOK

- * support staff for all students

LOOK

- * Welcoming ^{to families & community members}
- * more modern ^{w/ outside events support}
- ↳ natural light
- ↳ trees & grass & shade
- * More choice
- ↳ electives & other non-traditional learning opportunities

FEEL

- * Slower paced
- * Less # of classes ^{per day}
- * flexible learning
- * cool in summer
- warm in winter
- * safe
- ↳ rooms for breaks that support SEL

Feel

- more student voice
- Safe
- Feel seen
- Feel known & honored
- Comfortable
- Opportunities to explore new things

Sound

- Joyful
- Music
- Peaceful
- Supportive

- brighter lights

LOOK

- lockers ^{diverse staff}
- open spaces/
- inside outside/spaces
- ways to transform spaces into many things
- Plenty of space for extra curriculum

- Teams/Teaming at each grade level (True Middle School)
- Electives that are real life related:
 - Farming/Ag.
 - Medical
 - Technology
 - Gardening
 - Life Skills
 - Banking
 - Volunteering →

- Include a Volunteer element/class
- Promote Individ. sports; athletics as much/equally as team sports
- Mental Health classes

- Promote Individual sports; athletics as equally as team sports
- Offer mental Health classes
- Promote Inclusivity programs

Teams at each grade level (True Middle School) concept

Electives that are real life oriented

- Farming
- Inclusive Groups
- Technology
- Banking
- Life Skills →

more robust career
understanding

Career review
so kids know
younger options
they may have
never knew
existed or what
engineers actually
do

allow snacks +
gum (~~none that~~
some guidelines
(can't stain
fingers - properly
disposed)

drop in for
help - not
punitive but
before/lunch/
after school

anonymous
reporting about
fellow students
worried about
emotions, suicide,
bullying,
weapons, etc.)

team teaching
w/ collaboration
re. homework
assignments



House Memorial 4 Middle School Working Group

Meeting 1: Goals and Agenda

July 30, 2024 | 3:00–4:30pm

Overarching Goals of Meeting 1:

- Identify primary issues stopping classroom success in middle school.
- Discuss the needs of students, educators, and structures to address these obstacles.
- Get to know one another and set future goals.

Meeting Agenda:

1. **Introductions** (15 minutes)

- a. Name, organization/affiliation, and role.
- b. Share:
 - What brings you to this work;
 - Your biggest learning moment about middle school; and
 - Your most pressing concern about middle school.

2. **Overview and Purpose of Working Group** (10 minutes)

- a. HM4: <https://www.nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Legislation?chamber=H&legType=M&legNo=4&year=24>
- b. Members
- c. Structures and Supports
- d. Timelines and Future Agendas

3. **Small Group Jamboard Activity** (25 minutes)

a. **What are the unique needs of middle school students?**

1. *What emotional, developmental, and academic needs do these students have? Are these needs being met?*
2. *What hinders current middle school environments?*
3. *How do social relationships impact school experience?*
4. *What role does mental health play? How do current middle school structures hinder/support students' mental health?*
5. *How do extracurricular activities influence development?*
6. *What challenges do middle school students face during the transition from elementary to middle school? Middle to high school?*
7. *How can schools better support diverse learning styles in middle school?*
8. *What key factors contribute to student engagement and motivation at the middle school level?*

b. **What does a successful middle school structure look like (from the viewpoint of an administrator, educator, students?)**

1. *What does an engaging and successful classroom look like?*
2. *What do middle school educators need to feel supported?*



House Memorial 4 Middle School Working Group

Meeting 1: Goals and Agenda

July 30, 2024 | 3:00–4:30pm

3. *How should schedules be structured to maximize student learning, mental health, success, and wellbeing?*
4. *What leadership practices contribute to a positive and effective environment?*
5. *How can middle schools foster a sense of community and belonging among students?*
6. *What role do parents and families play in a successful middle school?*
7. *How can technology be effectively integrated into middle school education?*
8. *What professional learning opportunities and structures are most beneficial for middle school teachers?*

c. **Is funding sufficient to develop successful middle school models?**

1. *What resources are lacking in middle school environments due to funding limitations?*
2. *What are the most critical areas where increased funding could improve middle school education?*
3. *What innovative funding models could support the development of successful middle school programs?*
4. *What evidence exists that correlates adequate funding with successful middle school outcomes?*
5. *How can funding be equitably distributed to ensure all middle school students have access to high-quality education?*

4. **Break or Extra Working Time** (5 minutes)

5. **Whole Group Share Out** (15 minutes)

6. **Group Input on Future Study Topics and Resources Needed** (15 minutes)

- a. What information, research, or resources do you need?
- b. What do you hope the final product of this work will look like; what impact should it have?
- c. What agenda topics are important to you in future meetings?

7. **Next Steps and Reflection** (5 minutes)

Optional Resources:

- LESC Brief—[Landscape Review: Middle School Education](#), May 17, 2024



House Memorial 4 Middle School Working Group

Meeting 2: Goals and Agenda
August 15, 2024 | 3:00–4:30pm

Overarching Goals of Meeting 2:

- Synthesize responses to group needs and agenda ideas.
- Presentation of HM4, school models, and current state of middle school student outcomes.
- Learning from district leaders.
- System mapping to narrow to legislative recommendations.

Meeting Agenda:

1. **Welcome, Norms, and Summary of Last Meeting** (5 minutes)
 - a. Intros for anyone new
 - b. In the chat icebreaker, or come off mute: What's your most vivid middle school memory?
 - c. Group norms: Discussion and dialogue
2. **HM4 Presentation and Questions** (10 minutes)
 - a. Formal presentation of HM4:
<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Legislation?chamber=H&legType=M&legNo=4&year=24>
 - b. Presentation of LESC findings on school models and student outcomes
3. **Presentation of Jamboard Themes and System Mapping Approach** (15 minutes)
4. **Presentation from Clovis** (15 minutes, Superintendent Russ and Director Mendoza)
 - a. Related Q&A (5 minutes)
5. **Presentation about Ron Clark Academy Approach** (15 minutes, Superintendent Hawkins)
 - a. Related Q&A (5 minutes)
6. **Group Dialogue, Questions, and Reflections** (15 minutes)
 - a. What reflections do you have so far?
 - b. Help us define and categorize *who* should address each of these items.
 - c. Identify the top items you would elevate for *legislative* recommendations.
7. **Nomination of Middle School Students and Next Steps** (5 minutes)



House Memorial 4 Middle School Working Group

Meeting 3: Goals and Agenda

September 5, 2024 | 9:00am – 4:00pm

Overarching Goals of Meeting 3:

- Close loops on data and information needs requested by working group members.
- Introduce and hear from student members of the working group.
- Continued learning in service of primary objective to identify funding needs and policy levers to improve middle school education in New Mexico.
- Working sessions to get closer to a final product from the middle school group.

Meeting Agenda:

<p>9:00am – 10:00am</p>	<p>Welcome and LESC Staff Presentations</p> <p>Objective: Welcome from LESC members. Share information with the working group about student outcomes in different middle school models and current funding of middle school education to inform the working group’s knowledge of: 1) Research about how New Mexico students are doing in various middle school models; and 2) Current funding structures to support middle school education.</p> <p>Presenters: LESC Lawmakers; Gwen Perea Warniment; Jessica Hathaway; John Sena</p>
<p>10:00am – 11:00am</p>	<p>Facilitated Student-Led Feedback About, and Imagining of, Middle School</p> <p>Objective: Hear from students directly about their experiences at school so the working group can consider what, and how, student needs can be embedded into policy recommendations from the working group.</p> <p>Presenters: Students</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you could make school something brand new tomorrow: what would it look like? Sound like? Feel like? • What is something you really like about school right now? • What is something that you would change about school right now? • Think about the adults you interact with at school: which adults encourage you to pursue your goals and learning?
<p>11:00am – 11:15am</p>	<p>Break</p>
<p>11:15am – 12:15pm</p>	<p>Middle School Physical, Social, and Emotional Learning Needs</p> <p>Objective: Share information to inform a discussion about the ways middle school needs related to physical, social, and emotional health need to be prioritized and/or connected to policy recommendations.</p> <p>Presenters: LESC Staff; Soña (Magdalena) Saiz, Behavioral Health Manager, Public Education Department</p>
<p>12:15pm – 1:00pm</p>	<p>Lunch</p>

Attachment E: Meeting Agendas



House Memorial 4 Middle School Working Group

Meeting 3: Goals and Agenda

September 5, 2024 | 9:00am – 4:00pm

1:00pm – 2:00pm	<p>Policy for Effective Learning Environments</p> <p>Objective: Share information to inform a discussion about effective middle school design. Identify ideas and needs that can inform policy recommendations across three domains: 1) Academic design; 2) Experiential learning needs; and 3) Infrastructure.</p> <p>Presenters: LESC Staff; Sarah Hager, Middle School Fine Arts Educator, Cleveland Middle School, Albuquerque Public Schools; Michael Rodríguez, Executive Director, Dual Language Education of New Mexico; Pat Carden, Professional Educator/Instructional Coach, New Mexico State University</p>
2:00pm – 2:15pm	<p>Break</p>
2:15pm – 4:00pm	<p>Working Session</p> <p>Objective: This session will be a working session to identify, elevate, and prioritize ideas that can inform final recommendations from the working group. It will be led by LESC staff and include activities such as root cause analysis of funding and policy recommendations, possible systems mapping, and a review of middle school best practices identified by the working group to date.</p>

Post-Meeting Next Steps

- LESC staff to consolidate final recommendations and share with working group.
- Presentation to the Legislature in October.