



### District Middle School Survey Executive Summary

Austin Independent School District Middle School Principals were asked to canvas members of school support organizations such as their respective Parent Teacher Associations and Campus Advisory Councils, as well as to solicit the input of professional and paraprofessional staff.

Principals posed these three questions, which addressed significant aspect of middle school education:

1. What is your vision for the district, and how does middle school education relate to that vision?
2. What are the issues/concerns about middle school education that need attention?
3. What are your aspirations for middle school education? In the next five years, what do you see as the preferred state for middle school education?

#### Vision

Regarding vision for the district and the relationship of middle school education to that vision, all groups overwhelmingly supported the role of middle schools in preparing students for high school completion, college success or other post-secondary training, and attainment of profession success. Specific strategies included increasing emphasis on Science and Mathematics, developing early literacy, increasing opportunities for college and career planning, and adjusting hiring practices to include increased recruitment and retention of minority teachers. One middle school parent states:

*I believe that AISD should be an exemplary, cutting edge district that prepares students for life beyond public education. I think that middle schools, in order to be a part of that vision, should offer as many opportunities as possible for students to explore careers and their individual talents. I believe that we should come to grips with the fact that not all children want to go to college, and offer some alternatives for those students to explore other career pathways that do not require a college education.*

Another recurring theme was the concept of societal contribution or global citizenship made possible by developing principles of respect, integrity, and effort. Specific strategies included expanding enrichment activities, expanding the curriculum to emphasize depth, complexity, and teamwork, and project-based learning. Several schools and school groups praised the creation of smaller learning communities to foster positive relationships and develop appreciation of participation and citizenship. One CAC member shares:

*My vision of the district is to provide each middle school child with a safe, supportive environment that allows students to become global problem solvers, and academically competitive with other industrialized countries. With this broad vision in mind, it is important that young people have a one-on-one support system academic and socially...with opportunities to explore various avenues of interest such as fine arts and CATE.*

A third common theme was equity among schools as indicated by the dissolution of delineators such as class, color, and disparity of resources. Specific strategies included addressing the needs of low SES and ELL students, providing rigorous electives for all students in all schools, adjusting feeder patterns in the vertical teams, and creating more regionalized magnet-type programs, and increasing efforts in drop-out prevention. One middle school parent expresses:

*It is my hope that we can create strong vertical teams across the district so that elementary, middle, and high schools can all work together to provide the most complete education possible. It would be ideal to have all schools performing at a similar level, with similar high expectations of the students.*

### Issues and Concerns

Regarding the issues/concerns about middle school education that stakeholders feel merit attention, responses were varied. One predominant theme was a lack of preparedness—skills deficits, knowledge gaps, absence of rich, academic experiences, and low literacy. Specific recommendations included: increasing elective offerings, raising the quality of instruction, providing more active learning, increased differentiation, and improved staff development for teachers. One PTA member states:

*Teachers need to help in guiding the students to be successful. We need teachers and staff with a drive to connect and with an ability to relate to the children of this school. Some things that affect these students need to be addressed, and not overlooked. Maybe some students are having issues at home that cause a lack of enthusiasm for school. However, there is a way to pull these students through successfully; we have to find out how.*

Another predominant theme was the struggle to promote positive learning environments where students feel comfortable in participating, forming relationships, and developing self-confidence as scholars and as people. Large class sizes, large schools, off-task or distracting behaviors in the classroom, and a pre-occupation with standardized testing were cited as obstacles to one-on-one custom tailored instruction or individualized attention. Specific recommendations included reducing class sizes, expanding mentoring, providing a broad curriculum with multiple opportunities for students to participate, and reducing standardized testing practices. One middle school teacher relates:

*Students who come from struggling families need to feel like school is a place where they are connected. I am concerned that some of our students who feel a loss of connection in middle school will also feel a loss of connection in high school and will eventually drop out. I am not sure what the answer is, but I believe a strong sense of community is important in the middle school level.*

A third theme that emerged was a lack of effective interventions for students struggling academically, behaviorally, socially, or emotionally and/or inadequate challenge for high achieving students. Poor attendance, diminished interest in academics, and loss of “voice” were mentioned as deleterious effects of poor intervention strategies or efforts, while diminished interest and lack of progress were also mentioned as affecting more advanced students when those students are not adequately challenged. One middle school staff member asserts:

*I think student get stuck in a cycle of low performance, low expectations, and low self-esteem. Students who consistently fail to thrive, despite interventions should have more personalized instruction and mentoring through smaller teacher: student ratios and/or classroom assistants. Students who excel are often bored or under stimulated due to the required focus of teachers on students who do not meet TAKS requirements.*

### Aspirations for Middle Schools

Regarding aspirations for middle school education—particularly within the next five years--several themes emerged including increased individualization, an increasing infusion of technology, heightened parent involvement efforts, and unification of supports such as summer school programs, transition programs, health and social services, and expanded, evolving curricula. Representatives from several campuses alluded to standards set forth by the National Middle School Association, and many respondents referenced utilizing multiple approaches to better serve the needs of the “unique adolescent”. Some recommendations were highly specific such as the response by this middle school teacher regarding the importance of developing writing skills:

*I think there needs to be a bigger focus on students’ writing abilities. By the time these students get to high school, they need to have a concrete grasp on the basics of writing, so they may learn about the more stylistic approaches of writing. Colleges will be looking for well-crafted essays, and without advanced writing abilities, students will find it difficult to compete with other students around the country for that college acceptance letter.*

One middle school PTA member suggested instituting Service- Learning Projects. She states:

*There are programs such as Service-Learning that have grant money at no cost to the school district. These grants pay for substitutes, transportation, and supplies needed for the particular Service-Learning project chosen by the students. Studies have shown that Service-Learning programs have raised attendance rates, morale, and even respectfulness among students, giving them a different view of themselves and incentive to get farther in life. My vision and aspiration in the next five years is for AISD to use these types of resources so that money won’t be an issue in bringing all types of students to a better future.*

One Kealing Middle School PTA member succinctly but passionately expressed a theme common in many responses—excellence for all middle school students:

*By middle school career end, the students will have become well rounded enough not only to survive a high school career, but to thrive in it. Also, at exit level from middle school, the students have an idea of what college they want to attend, what is required to get into college, and a way and a plan to achieve those goals. Students want to be successful—even the hard to deal with—but they do not know how. Parents and educators need to open their hearts and minds and stand for nothing less than excellence, then work toward that only. Thank you for reading my thoughts.*

### Summary and Recommendations

The three questions posited in the Middle School Survey elicited an array of responses from CAC members, PTA members, and school staff in all eighteen middle schools. A number of prevalent themes emerged, and chief among these were:

Vision for the district: Preparing students for high school completion and further success  
Societal contribution and global citizenship  
Equity among schools through dissolution of delineators such as social class

Issues and Concerns: Lack of academic preparedness such as skill deficits and knowledge gaps  
Creation of positive learning environments  
Lack of effective interventions for struggling students

Aspirations of Middle Schools: Various aspirations including individualization, infusion of technology, increased parental involvement, unification of supports, adherence to National Middle School Association standards  
Predominant aspiration: Excellence for all middle school students