

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

- 1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards.** *The educational program is challenging, rigorous, and purposeful; it has performance expectations that are common across all grades and subject areas. Teachers maintain performance expectations that are consistent and interrelated across and within subject areas. Everyone has high expectations for all students (Essential Element characteristics 2.2, 2.8, 4.18, 7.4)*
- 2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards.** *The educational program is comprehensive and inclusive, embracing and encompassing all of the State's 28 learning standards. It is articulated vertically and horizontally with a set of learning skills that are common across all grades and subject areas and taught and reinforced in each grade and subject area. The program has up-to-date written curricula aligned with the State's learning standards Teachers provide instruction that is standards-based, challenging, rigorous and purposeful; they use classroom assessments that reflect the State's learning standards and are aligned with State assessments. (Essential Element Characteristics 2.3, 2.5, 2.6, 2.10, 4.2, 4.13)*
- 3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.** *The educational program reflects interdependence, emphasizes cross-program connections, and promotes shared responsibility. Teachers focus instruction on thinking, reasoning, and problem solving and, at the same time, ensure that students acquire necessary content and subject matter. They use interdisciplinary approaches to help students integrate their studies and meet learning standards. (Essential Element characteristics 2.4. 4.10, 4.11)*
- 4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught.** *The school and the staff provide each student with a variety of learning experiences that are academically challenging, developmentally appropriate, and personally relevant in order for each of them to make informed educational and personal decisions. Teachers vary activities to maintain student interest. (Essential Element characteristics 1.6, 4.8)*
- 5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios).** *The educational program includes diagnostic assessments that regularly and routinely monitor the learning of each student relative to the State's standards and community expectations. Teachers use classroom assessments that are instructionally useful indicators of individual student growth and performance not only to monitor each student's progress in meeting the State's learning standards but also to plan instruction. Staff use data, both personal and achievement, to make curricular and instructional decisions. (Essential Element characteristics 2.11, 4.14, 4.15)*
- 6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards.** *The school has a schedule with flexible time assignments within blocks of time to encourage interdisciplinary programs and the creative use of time. (Essential Element characteristic 3.3)*
- 7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards.** *The program provides targeted and timely academic intervention services that are based upon a careful assessment of the academic, social, and emotional needs of students at risk of not meeting the State's learning standards. The school provides, for those students needing additional help to meet the State's standards, opportunities for additional time, instruction, and personal support. (Essential Element characteristics 2.14, 3.8)*
- 8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.** *The school has teacher teams sharing responsibility for the education and personal development of a common group of student and provides common planning time for those teachers and teacher teams sharing responsibility for a common group of students. (Essential Element characteristics 3.1, 3.2, 4.17)*

DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS: High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

- 1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.** *The school and staff are committed to developing the whole child, intellectually and academically, personally and socially, physically, emotionally, and ethically. The school is structured to create close, sustained relationships between students and teachers. (Essential Element characteristics 1.1, 2.1, 3.6)*
- 2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.** *The school provides support services such as guidance, counseling, and health-related services to all students. Counseling and guidance services are available to assist students and their families in making life, career, and educational choices. A network of trained professionals, special programs, and community resources are available to assist those who have extraordinary needs and require additional services to cope with the changes of early adolescence and/or the academic demands of middle-level education. The school collaborates and cooperates with other human service agencies in the community. (Essential Element characteristics 3.15, 6.4, 6.7)*
- 3. Teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment.** *Teachers have a deep understanding of their subject matter, of different approaches to student learning, and of diverse teaching techniques. They use a range of successful, research-based teaching strategies that are developmentally and cognitively appropriate, matching instruction to the students' varied learning styles and different intelligences. Teachers involve students in their learning, encouraging them to contribute to their learning experiences, to make choices, to explore, to question, to experience, to learn, to grow, to develop social, interpersonal and leadership skills in addition to academic proficiency.(Essential Element characteristics 4.4, 4.6, 4.7)*
- 4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.** *The educational program offers opportunities for the development of personal responsibility and self-direction. (Essential Element characteristic 2.12)*
- 5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems.** *The educational program emphasizes reading, writing, and mathematics (literacy and numeracy) across the subject areas with expectations for performance that are consistent across and within the disciplines and commonly understood by teachers, students, and parents. (Essential Element characteristic 2.7)*
- 6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.** *The school has ties with the school community that strengthen connections between school/education and career opportunities. Students have opportunities to examine, explore, discuss, and understand the changes associated with early adolescence. (Essential Element characteristics 3.12, 6.3)*
- 7. All students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.** *Those in positions of leadership provide students with opportunities to assume significant and meaningful leadership roles in the school. (Essential Element characteristic 5.11)*
- 8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.** *The school encourages active parent involvement through a variety of activities. Teachers inform and involve parents of middle-level students in their children's education by helping them understand the learning standards that their children must meet, the instructional program, their children's progress, and how to help their children at home with schoolwork, school decisions, and successful development through adolescence. There exists a system of two-way communication between the school and the parents and families of its students. (Essential Element characteristics 3.11, 4.19, 6.5)*
- 9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support.** *The school provides opportunities for students to participate in youth service, community service, and/or service learning activities. (Essential Element characteristic 3.10)*
- 10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment.** *The school provides a variety of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. (Essential Element characteristic 3.9)*

SOCIAL EQUITY: High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

- 1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations.** *The school provides, for those students needing additional help to meet the State's standards, opportunities for additional time, instruction, and personal support. The school promotes and encourages appropriate participation of pupils with disabilities in all curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities. The programs and services of students with disabilities or other special needs are integrated throughout the school building to ensure access to the same instruction as their peers. (Essential Element characteristics 3.8, 3.13, 3.14)*
- 2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.** *Teachers use technology and other instructional resources purposely to support and enhance learning. Use a range of successful, research-based teaching strategies that are developmentally and cognitively appropriate, matching instruction to the students' varied learning styles and different intelligences. (Essential Element characteristics 4.6, 4.9)*
- 3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.** *Staff routinely and systematically monitor and evaluate student learning to assess and improve instructional effectiveness. (Essential Element characteristic 7.10)*
- 4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.** *The school provides, for those students needing additional help to meet the State's standards, opportunities for additional time, instruction, and personal support. The school promotes and encourages appropriate participation of pupils with disabilities in all curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities. The programs and services of students with disabilities or other special needs are integrated throughout the school building to ensure access to the same instruction as their peers. (Essential Element characteristics 3.8, 3.13, 3.14)*
- 5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures.** *The school ensures that all students, staff, parents, and families feel secure, valued and respected as significant contributors to the school community. Respect and caring engender a feeling of self-worth, self-confidence, and personal efficacy (Essential Elements characteristics 3.7, 6.2)*
- 6. The school community knows every student well.** *The school and staff ensure for each student a safe, inviting, trusting, and mutually-respectful learning environment that offers both physical and psychological safety. The school and staff connect each young adolescent in positive ways with the school and with caring adults within the school. (Essential Element characteristics 1.4, 1.5)*
- 7. The faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school.** *The educational program engages and involves the family, local community, and the world outside school in the education and personal development of young adolescents. (Essential Element characteristic 2.15)*
- 8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.** *Adults and older youths provide positive role models and constant affirmation and recognition. (Essential Element characteristic 6.1)*
- 9. Staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of its students.** *The school ensures that all students, staff, parents, and families feel secure, valued and respected as significant contributors to the school community (Essential Element characteristic 3.7)*
- 10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.** *The school fosters each student's personal development, health, wellness and safety. (Essential Elements Conclusion)*

ORGANIZATION STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES: High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain a trajectory toward excellence.

- 1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does, drives every facet of school change.** *The school staff understand the philosophy and mission of the standards-driven middle-level school and are implementing the Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and the Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs. (Essential Element characteristics 7.2, 7.3)*
- 2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication.** *Those in positions of leadership create, promote, and sustain a school culture of mutual support and collective responsibility for the educational and personal development of each and every young adolescent. They promote and facilitate inter-school cooperation, collaboration, and communication with feeder elementary schools and receiving high schools. (Essential Element characteristics 5.6, 5.13)*
- 3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm.** *Teachers are themselves learners who are constantly engaged in professional and intellectual growth activities. The school staff collaborate and cooperate in planning and providing professional learning opportunities. (Essential Element characteristics 4.20, 7.9)*
- 4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement.** *Those in leadership positions involve staff and others in the operation of the school or program, empowering and encouraging them to contribute and to make decisions that benefit students. The school staff know the needs and characteristics of students in the middle grades and the instructional strategies and techniques that work best for these students; they are familiar with each of the State's 28 learning standards and incorporate in their own classrooms and work spaces educational experiences that help all students achieve all the standards - including those that are outside their own area of content expertise; know and understand their subject matter and course curriculum thoroughly; know and understand the State's assessment system; and, know and understand how to use data to make curricular and instructional decisions to improve students' academic performance and/or enhance personal development. (Essential Element characteristics 5.10, 7.1, 7.5, 7.6, 7.7, 7.8)*
- 5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships.** *The school and staff provide a successful transition from the elementary grades to the middle grades to the high school grades and from childhood to adolescence. The educational program is articulated with the elementary feeder schools and with the secondary receiving schools, building on the foundational knowledge and skills of the elementary grades and, in doing so, preparing students for success in high school. The school provides a gradual transition from the more self-contained classrooms of the elementary school to the more departmentalized structure of the high school, providing students with opportunities for increasingly independent learning experiences and responsibilities within a safe and structured environment. (Essential Element characteristics 1.7, 2.9, 3.17)*
- 6. The school staff holds itself accountable for the students' success.** *Those in leadership positions articulate and maintain high standards for classroom instruction and student performance. (Essential Element characteristic 5.7)*
- 7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students.** *Teachers recognize that they must work together cooperatively and collaboratively, rather than individually and in isolation, to ensure that all their students achieve at high levels and meet all the State's learning standards. Those in leadership positions support and encourage teachers, individually and collectively, to take risks, to explore, to question, to try new instructional approaches, to continue as learners, and to grow. (Essential Element characteristics 4.21, 5.12)*
- 8. The school and district staffs work with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare, and mentor novice and experienced teachers.** *(Essential Elements Conclusion)*
- 9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance.** *The educational program engages and involves the family, local community, and the world outside school in the education and personal development of young adolescents. The school encourages active parent involvement through a variety of activities. Teachers inform and involve parents of middle-level students in their children's education by helping them understand the learning standards that their children must meet, the instructional program, their children's progress, and how to help their children at home with schoolwork, school decisions, and successful development through adolescence. There exists a system of two-way communication between the school and the parents and families of its students. (Essential Element characteristics 2.15, 3.11, 4.19, 6.5)*