

Top 5 Ways to Improve Middle School

Background Information: The recent report by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, "Mind the (Other) Gap!," investigated whether the focus on reducing achievement gaps in minimum competency are shrinking achievement gaps at the highest levels of student achievement. The report noted:

- “The federal accountability system has resulted in schools and teachers placing greater emphasis on low-achieving students than on high-achievers.”
- NCLB has “had a detrimental effect on gifted education, due to the law’s focus on underperforming students...and a concentration on standardized testing that discourages investment in services to gifted children.”
- The report suggests two educational policy considerations: “How will this affect our brightest students?” and “How will this help other students begin to achieve at high levels?”
- Academic acceleration is “a collection of interventions that allow bright students to proceed at a faster, more realistic pace of learning.”
- “Letting students progress through K-12 schools as quickly as their ability and desire allow is a common-sense, research-supported policy intervention that over time should *save* money for schools” (see *A Nation Deceived* by Colangelo, et al., 2004).

Issue: Too many middle school students are not engaged and motivated in the current middle school structure.

Solution: Create an advanced learners allotment to incentivize the following recommendations:

1. **Accelerated courses in the core** – Compacting three years of curriculum into two years as is frequently done with math; difference is the pace and results in increased engagement.
2. **High school courses in middle school** – Telescoping the middle school curriculum into two years creates an opportunity at the 8th grade level for students to take coursework traditionally offered in the high school freshman year and begin to accumulate high school credits, as is already done with algebra, geometry, and languages. By adding the opportunity to take English 1, World Geography, and IPC or Biology in middle school, we open opportunities for students to take additional college credit bearing courses (IB, AP, Dual Credit, CTE) in high school. This results in a significant savings for Texas families and reinvigorates the senior year of high school by adding additional meaning and incentive. Students who are interested can also take advantage of early graduation and move on to their college work.
3. **Languages other than English** – Most middle school language options offer level I of the language over two years. Advanced students are capable of taking the course in a single year and could then earn levels 1 and 2 in middle school, making it more realistic to achieve level 4 and 5 in high school while meeting other requirements for the DAP.

4. **Texas Virtual School Network** – Expand appropriate options for students at the middle school level. These could include high school courses or advanced electives that may not be feasible at the middle school level due to student need, staffing allocations, or physical space.
5. **Gifted Elective Course** – This could be an opportunity for students to focus on the Texas Performance Standards Project as well as engage in academic competitions and other co-curricular options such as Texas Future Problem Solving, Community Problem Solving, Destination Imagination, Math Pentathlon, MathCounts, UIL, National History Day, and other similar opportunities.

Desired Outcomes Achieved:

- Students receive a more enriched middle school experience.
- Students have the opportunity to take more advanced courses.
- Students have the opportunity to earn additional college credit in high school
- Increase numbers of students pursuing the DAP.

Testimony of Michelle Swain, Round Rock ISD and TAGT President-Elect, to the Senate Committee on Education, April 20, 2010.