

2022



BUILDING POSITIVE EXPERIENCES IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

A Report From The Middle
School Working Group



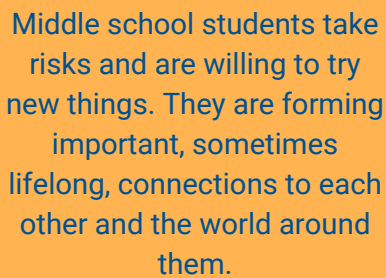
Elevate is a regional cradle to career partnership that seeks to increase educational attainment (a postsecondary degree or credential). United Way of the Blue Mountains powers the initiative by convening partners and facilitating collaboration. A Steering Committee made up of representatives from around the region sets goals and provides strategic direction. Working Groups are organized around priority areas identified by the Steering Committee to develop frameworks for action and implement change. Elevate serves communities in Columbia and Walla Walla counties, and the Milton-Freewater area.

INTRODUCTION

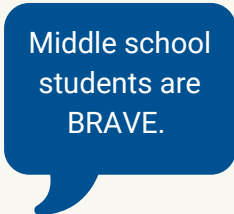
Elevate's Steering Committee recognizes that the middle school years are a period of significant change for both students and their families. It is a unique time when students are developing a more independent relationship to school and their families, and are creating expectations for their futures. **A positive middle school experience that includes appropriate supports and diverse opportunities can have long lasting impacts on social and emotional development, academic success, and educational attainment.** Elevate seeks to ensure that every middle school student successfully transitions to a secondary education experience that meets their needs. To help achieve this goal, Elevate launched a Middle School Working Group in January 2021. The Middle School Working Group was given the following agenda, to which they added an equity statement, in italics:

The Middle School Working Group knows students and their families are diverse, so we work to create strategies that build on their strengths and remove barriers to success.

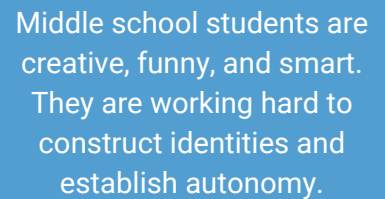
- Increase positive connections among middle school students, their families, schools, and the community through purposeful communication and meaningful engagement.
- Create opportunities in schools and in the community that inspire all students and support their successful transition to high school.



Middle school students take risks and are willing to try new things. They are forming important, sometimes lifelong, connections to each other and the world around them.



Middle school students are BRAVE.



Middle school students are creative, funny, and smart. They are working hard to construct identities and establish autonomy.

FINDINGS

The Middle School Working Group met approximately every other week via Zoom from January to July 2021. They began by engaging in shared learning in order to create a framework for family and community engagement and think productively about creating new opportunities for students. The learning process involved hearing from experts in adolescent development, family and community engagement, and educational attainment and equity. The experts included:

- Dr. Erin Pahlke, Associate Professor of Psychology at Whitman College
- Sherry Wilson, from the National Association of Family, School, and Community Engagement
- Dr. Thymai Dong & Laura Koenig from E3 Alliance, a cradle to career partnership in Central Texas

Working Group members also contributed their own experience and expertise to the conversation as they synthesized their learning. From a place of shared understanding, group members worked to devise strategies to address the charges.

EARLY ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Early adolescence is a period of developmental significance. Middle school students are working to build an identity while simultaneously experiencing profound changes in physical, neural, and cognitive development. While it can be tempting to characterize middle school as a time of developmental turmoil, it is important to recognize and build on adolescents' strengths. Middle school students are capable and adaptable; they are growing in autonomy, discovering their unique strengths, and charting a course for their futures. Strategies aimed at supporting and engaging middle school students should take developmental themes into account.

- In early adolescence, the brain undergoes neural pruning. Experiences during this time influence which connections, or synapses, are strengthened and which are “pruned,” or lost.
- In early adolescence, the limbic system—the portion of the brain which drives behavior and emotion—is more developed than the prefrontal cortex, which manages executive functioning (including planning and organizing). This implies that adolescents may be more emotional, more reactive to stress, and more likely to engage in reward-seeking behaviors. Research has shown that young teens are more likely to engage in risky behaviors when they are with their peers than when they are alone.
- Significant cognitive developments during early adolescence include an increased ability to think abstractly and the ability to consider multiple possibilities. Adolescents begin to view knowledge as relative, which can generate feelings of uncertainty. They also begin to develop metacognition, or the ability to think about their own thinking, which can lead to increased introspection and self-consciousness. Metacognition also leads adolescents to develop two new perspectives:
 1. The sense that they are the central focus of a large audience, which results in an effort to balance their own preoccupations and others' concerns.
 2. A sense of themselves and their experiences as wholly unique and without comparison, which can generate feelings of isolation. Adolescents develop a better understanding of their commonalities as they develop deeper relationships with peers.
- Early adolescence is a time of transformation and exploration, particularly with regard to key elements of identity. Issues related to gender, racial, ethnic, class, and sexual identity become more salient during adolescence as teens explore their sense of self by encountering others. In psychology, this is called the Looking Glass Self, their identity is based on how they think others perceive them. To foster healthy identity development, adolescents need family and peer support, mentors, caring adults, and a positive school culture that provides a safe space for students to take appropriate risks and forge meaningful social connections.

ADOLESCENT IDENTITY FORMATION CAN BE SUPPORTED BY:

- Families who provide support and structure, along with independence to explore
- Peers who provide emotional support
- Mentors who allow for a bond
- Teachers who help create a supportive school culture
- Schools or community organizations that provide opportunities for students to explore new possibilities

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Family and community engagement encompasses all the ways adults interact to support children's development, academic achievement, and long-term success. Most important is simply that families and communities are supportive of the general project of education. Effective partnerships between communities, schools, and families are predicated on trusting, reciprocal relationships.

- Engaging families looks different in middle school than in elementary school. For example, there are less likely to be organizations like Parent-Teacher Associations, and parents are most likely to attend events that showcase their students' skills and talents, or where they are able to observe their students having fun. Attendance at events such as student concerts, art exhibits, and sporting events are examples of meaningful engagement.
- Schools should be clear about what they want from families and about how families can best support their students. To this end, it is vital that every communication uses plain language and has a clear purpose and that parents know what to do in response, or why the information is important.

TOWARDS PURPOSEFUL COMMUNICATION:

Through conversation, the Working Group recognized that in order to improve communication with parents and families, school staff should be mindful of the use of specialized vocabulary. Like most institutions, schools generate specialized vocabulary whose meaning is constructed within the context of the school and school activities. Examples include "intervention specialist," "Google classroom," "Skyward," "LMS," "Boosters," "WEB leaders". The use of a specialized vocabulary unintentionally creates a group of "insiders" - those who understand and use the vocabulary, and a group of "outsiders" - those who don't understand the vocabulary. Without using plain language, or creating bridges for understanding when plain language is not available, we risk creating "outsiders" who won't engage with the school's efforts to reach out to them, simply because they don't know what they are talking about, or feel that they don't belong. When school staff are attentive to the ways in which the use of specialized language can undermine attempts to engage families, they can adjust their messaging to build greater inclusivity.

- One of the biggest challenges for parents during middle school is determining when to provide support for their student, and when to encourage greater autonomy. Families' roles change with a student's development, but it's unrealistic to expect them to know how that role changes. Schools need to communicate clearly what their expectations for family engagement are, and what that looks like.
- To successfully engage all students and families, schools might consider taking a tiered approach. This could look like developing universal strategies that are likely to reach all students and families, such as a flyer or on-line resource, to slightly more involved strategies for harder-to-reach students and families, such as a phone call or text message, and high-touch strategies for students and families who have been hardest to reach, such as home visits or other forms of face to face communication.

According to the National Association for School, Family and Community Engagement, successful engagement is predicated on four core beliefs:

1. All families have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
2. All families have the capacity to support their children's learning.
3. Families and school/program staff should be equal partners.
4. The responsibility for building and sustaining partnerships between school, home, and community rests primarily with school and program staff, especially school and program leaders

ATTAINMENT & EQUITY

Academic success in middle school has implications for future educational attainment. Research suggests there is a strong correlation between the completion of Algebra 1 (pre-algebra) in 8th grade and the completion of a postsecondary credential. E3 Alliance, in Central Texas, provides an example of a project that is working to address issues of attainment and equity. Through their research examining student success, the E3 Alliance found:

- Only 56% of Texas students who do not take college-aligned math classes in high school enroll in postsecondary education; and only 18% of those students complete a postsecondary credential with six years of enrollment.
- 80% of students taking college-aligned math courses enroll in postsecondary, and 60% complete in six years.
- A strong predictor of a student taking college-aligned math in high school is the successful completion of Algebra 1 in 8th grade.

In Texas, students of color and low-income students are less likely to take Algebra 1 in 8th grade, even those who score highly on the State's 5th grade math assessment. To create more equitable math pathways, the E3 Alliance built a three-pronged approach:

1. Engaging with stakeholders so that students, families and counselors are informed of what math pathways are available
2. Initiating vertical planning to ensure elementary, middle and high school programs are in alignment
3. Supporting teacher effectiveness

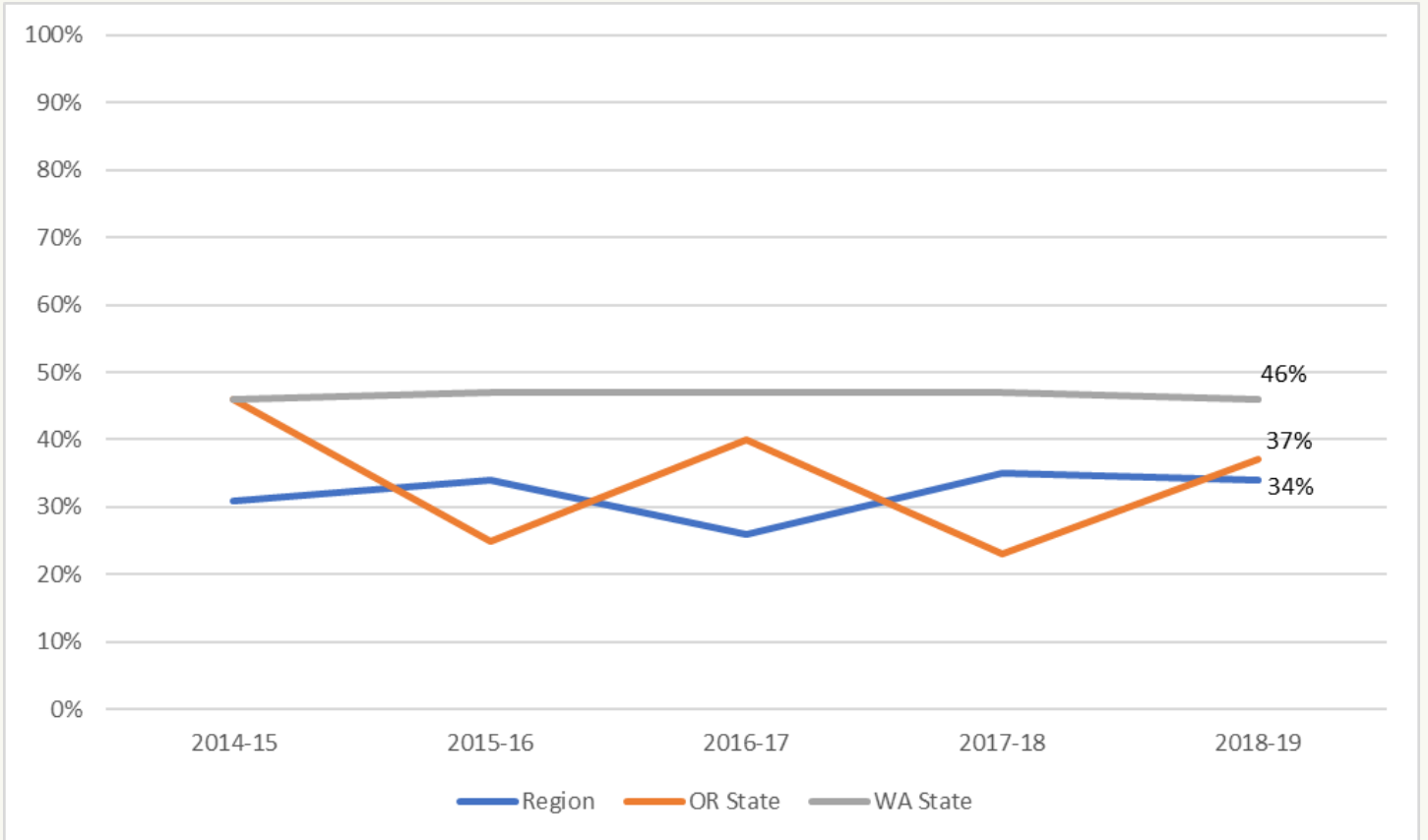
In addition, to engage more black and Latino students in advanced math courses, E3 promoted the adoption of an "opt-out" rather than an "opt-in" policy. Through this approach, all students are automatically enrolled in more rigorous math courses and have to opt out to change their placement. As classrooms become more diverse, districts have had to support more professional development for teaching staff around culturally responsive teaching.

The Middle School Working Group looked at data regarding 8th grade math proficiency in our region, disaggregated by race and income (accessed through the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Instruction and Oregon Department of Education). In Washington and Oregon, it is not necessary to take Algebra I in order to meet 8th grade math proficiency standards, as measured by the Smarter Balanced Assessment, a national exam that evaluates grade level standards.

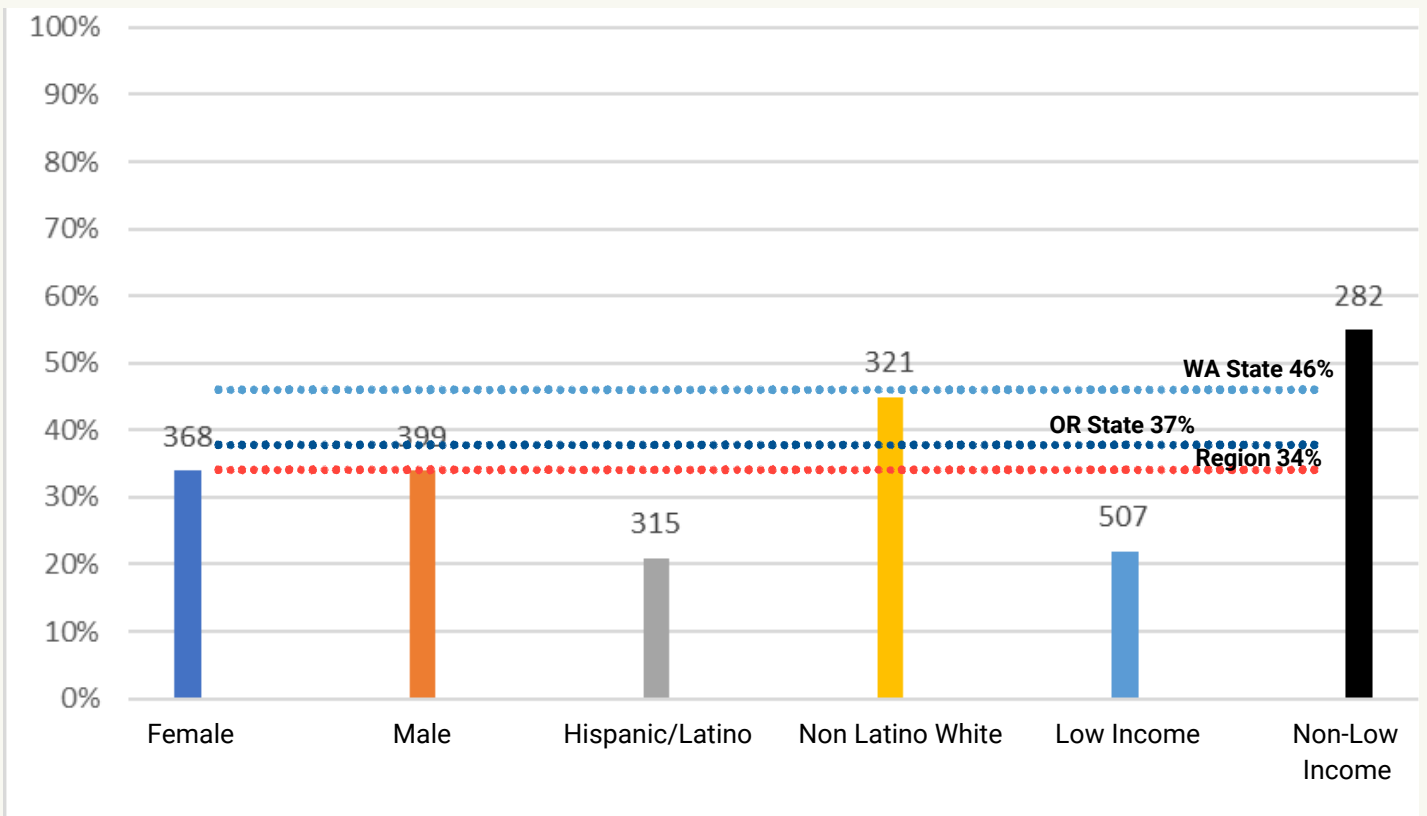
The data shows that white and non-low-income students performed above the regional average, while Hispanic/Latino and low-income students performed below regional average. The group looked at data from 2014-15 through 2018-19 and noted that the gap between low-income and non-low-income, and white and Latino/Hispanic student achievement scores has persisted over time.

Of the four school districts represented in the Working Group, three offer 8th grade students the option of taking Algebra 1; Working Group members report the students who take Algebra 1 tend to be students who are already on an "Honors" track, where students of color and students living in poverty are underrepresented in those courses. This may be a future area of focus for work at the Middle School level.

Percentage of Students who Met 8th Grade Math Standard
 Source: OSPI and ODE, Smarter Balance Assessment (SBAC)



Percent of 8th Graders who Met Math Standards, By Subgroup 2018-19
 Source OSPI and ODE, SBAC



STRATEGIES

In response to their shared learning, Working Group members devised the following Strategies:

Walla Walla Public Schools middle schools implementing new engagement and communications strategies

Working Group members from Walla Walla Public Schools collaborated with Elevate staff to create an information sheet for families. This information sheet is intended to address a specific engagement challenge at the middle school level: the lack of an obvious point of contact. At the middle school level, parents report confusion around how best to connect with the school, and students have diverse needs that are met by different staff members. The information sheet—available in English and Spanish—features staff photos; contact information; and a clear, concise description of their roles.

Additionally, Working Group members from Walla Walla Public Schools are interested in utilizing informal neighborhood gatherings to build relationships with students and their families. They envision events away from school campuses and without a formal agenda—a markedly different approach from many traditional engagement events, which typically ask families to come to the schools and listen to what the school has to say. In contrast, the Working Group hopes to host neighborhood events where school staff and families are positioned as equal partners in their students' education. While planning for these neighborhood gatherings is currently on hold given public health concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the goal is to build the positive relationships.

Partnership with The Listeners Project

The Listeners Project: Queremos Escucharte is a local project that promotes listening as a tool for building community, empowering one another, and celebrating community members' lives. This community collaboration was developed by the Walla Walla Immigrant Rights Coalition's Colectivo de Arte Social in partnership with the Walla Walla Public Library and the Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

Together with the Listeners Project and other partners, including Walla Walla Music Organization and local 21st Century programs, the Middle School Working Group hopes to generate a series of recordings that document local middle school students' perspectives on the events of the past year.

Valuing the perspective and lived experience of middle school students foregrounds their agency and acknowledges their role as important members of the community. Opportunities for middle school students to share their experiences and perspectives on critical, contemporary issues within the broader community positively contributes to their growing sense of independence and supports their emergence into adulthood.

While these strategies were designed by Working Group members from Walla Walla Public Schools, they are readily available and adaptable to other local districts.

EVALUATION

The Working Group discussed several methods to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies they developed. They did not establish a formal process for evaluation, and that could be crafted through additional work.

- Elevate is in the process of becoming part of a national organization connecting cradle-to-career initiatives called StriveTogether. Within the framework they have established, 8th-grade math proficiency is an indicator of success in middle school.
- Members of the Steering Committee felt that 9th-grade On Track data is an important indicator; 9th grade students who are on track to graduate have likely made a successful transition from middle school to high school. Further, the Washington State Office of the Superintendent reports that students who are considered “on track” in 9th grade are nearly four times more likely to graduate compared to those who are not considered on track. In 2018, Washington required that students take 20 credits in order to graduate high school, students are now required to take 24 credits, which suggests the stakes are even higher for being on track in 9th grade. Current 9th grade on track data for our districts in Washington show that white and non-low-income students are doing above average while Hispanic/Latino and low-income students are doing below average in this measure.
- Working Group members noted that data from the Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) survey is a useful evaluation tool for a number of issues, including family and community engagement. In our region, WWPS, Touchet Public Schools, Waitsburg Public Schools, and Dayton Public Schools currently use the CEE survey. Working Group members who use the CEE data will use it to help evaluate the effectiveness of their engagement strategies.
- The Working Group developed a matrix through which to think critically about specific engagement strategies, based on the framework they developed through the shared learning process.

NEXT STEPS

The Middle School Working Group will continue working to implement the strategies outlined in this report and to monitor their efficacy in meeting the charges from Elevate’s Steering Committee. Given the group’s learning around the implications of achieving proficiency in middle grade math, there may also be future opportunities to expand the scope of the Working Group in this direction. If you are interested in engaging with the Middle School Working Group, please contact Christy Lieuallen (christy@uwbluemt.org) or Amanda Mount (amanda@uwbluemt.org).

Elevate would like to extend appreciation and gratitude to Middle School
Working Group Members

MIDDLE SCHOOL WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

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William Hammon, 21st Century, Walla Walla Public Schools

Brenda Henderson, Dayton Middle School

Karen Hedine, Walla Walla YMCA

Hannah MacDonald, Parent and business owner

Tony McGuire, Walla Walla Community College & Community Resilience Initiative

Rosy Nechodom, Waitsburg Public Schools

Donald Ponds, John Sager Middle School

Sue Parrish, Retired middle school teacher

Angela Potts, Walla Walla Parks and Recreation

Luis Rosales, Trilogy Recovery Community

Mariela Rosas, Children's Home Society

Mike Spiess, Waitsburg Public Schools

Dustin Stocking, Parent

STAFF

Lena Friedman, Whitman College Community Fellow

Jacqueline Lonning, Elevate/United Way of the Blue Mountains

Catherine Veninga, Community Council

Additional Resources for Family and Community Engagement:

NAFSCE Frameworks Report

Carlina Brown Banks, Road Map Project

Dr. Karen Mapp, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Dual Capacity-building Framework for Family-School Partnerships

E3 Alliance's work in central Texas

