

# Moving Up the Middle:

## What Texas Must Do To Prepare Its Middle School Students for Post-secondary Success

*“America faces many challenges, but the enemy I fear most is complacency. We are about to be hit by the full force of global competition. If we continue to ignore the obvious task at hand while others beat us at our own game, our children and grandchildren will pay the price. We must now establish a sense of urgency.”*

– Charles Vest, former president, Massachusetts Institute of Technology



### Executive Summary

Texas’s public education system has reached a critical juncture. On the one hand, reform pressures are more intense than ever. Amid evidence that the public schools are, on the whole, not preparing most students well enough for the demands of higher education and the workplace, we have elevated our sights to post-secondary success for all. At the same time, funding for public education has been reduced, and further cuts may lie ahead. With less money to spend and higher accountability standards to meet, education leaders and stakeholders are struggling to figure out how to do more with less.

Some doubt this can be done. But based on our work in public schools throughout the Houston area over the past 15 years, Houston A+ Challenge is optimistic that public schools can prepare all students for success beyond high school, despite the difficult budget climate – and we believe that the linchpin is transforming middle schools.

Today, the problems with American middle schools are well documented. Reams of studies have shown that they are the weak link in the chain of public education. Why? Some argue that the core problem is the structure itself, and that middle schools should be eradicated and all schools transitioned to a K-8 configuration. But as the failed experiment of reorganizing high schools into small learning communities

has revealed, changing the structure without changing how principals and teachers carry out their everyday work is unlikely to have the desired impact.

The more insidious problem in middle schools seems to be the widespread absence of a culture of high expectations and a rigorous academic program focused on preparing all students for success in high school. As a result, students who are making steady progress in the elementary years often fall off track during their middle school years and are ill-equipped for high school by the time they transition to the 9th grade. While it is possible for them to catch up with their better-prepared peers, the odds are heavily against them – and their future prospects are bleak as a result.

Recognizing the pivotal importance of a high-quality middle school experience, and thus the huge potential inherent in significantly strengthening this link of the education chain, Houston A+ Challenge launched a major new program in 2010 in a group of Houston-area middle schools. The goal of the Challenge Network is to dramatically increase the numbers of students who are “on track” for post-secondary success by transforming middle school culture and practices around teaching and learning. This is being accomplished through a multifaceted series of program elements, including intensive analyses of student’s academic performance data,

performance coaching for teachers and principals, revamped assessment practices, and a variety of student and family engagement activities.

The Challenge Network is still in its early stages, but the initial results appear promising. As A+'s leadership and staff reflected on these results, we realized that it was time to share what they have learned with a broader audience and recommend policy changes that are needed to support and facilitate school improvement efforts.

To put it simply, A+ believes that most middle schools and school districts need to fundamentally change how they carry out their work in order to ensure that they are preparing all students for post-secondary success. This will require bold leadership, the courage to challenge the status quo, an eagerness to learn new ways ... and a great deal of hard work.

It also will require freedom to innovate and to try new approaches. Over the years, federal and state policies governing public education have multiplied exponentially. The impetus has been the desire for better results, but these efforts have often had the opposite effect: overregulation has significantly reduced schools' ability to tailor their approaches and programs to meet their students' needs. Overregulation has stifled innovation, de-skilled the work of educators, and undercut the most important element of transformation at the school level: ownership. This is not the only problem, but we believe it is one of the most significant. Accordingly, Houston A+ Challenge urges policymakers to shift more accountability to the school level while also taking the necessary steps to ensure that school leaders and educators are fully equipped to shoulder the challenges of reform.

The policy recommendations contained in this white paper provide a road map for implementing this new model of accountability. We believe that pursuing these recommendations – ranging from better curriculum and assessments to principals and teachers who are evaluated more fairly and rigorously, given appropriate opportunities for professional development, supported in their work, and compensated based on their demonstrated effectiveness – will create much better conditions for teaching and learning within schools and classrooms and provide middle school students in Texas with the kind of education they both need and deserve.

## **A Snapshot of Student Achievement in Texas**

According to the Texas Education Code, the mission of public education is to ensure that all Texas children have access to a quality education that enables them to achieve their potential and fully participate now and in the future in the social, economic, and educational opportunities of our state and nation. Today, however, data on an array of student outcomes make it clear that our public schools are achieving this mission for only about half of the students in Texas. Despite decades of standards-based reform, far too many young people continue to graduate from high school with a diploma that means little – if they graduate at all.

The statistics are sobering:

- Only 22 percent of Texas students who began 8th grade in 1996-98 earned any type of post-secondary degree or certificate. Among African American and Latino students, the figure was less than 13 percent.<sup>1</sup>
- Fewer than two-thirds of Texas's high school students graduate in four years, and the rates are even lower among Hispanic and African American students.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2011, Texas ranked 42nd nationally in the percentage of high school graduates going to college (55 percent).<sup>3</sup>
- Despite high passing rates on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), Texas 4th graders ranked 27th in math and 38th in reading among the states in the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Texas 8th graders ranked 12th in math and 39th in reading on the NAEP.
- Our students also tend to perform poorly in international comparisons; for example, 21 countries outperformed Texas students in the Class of 2011 in math;<sup>4</sup> other states with higher academic standards (such as Massachusetts) fare far better.<sup>5</sup>
- Half of the students entering two-year colleges in Texas, and 23 percent of those entering four-year colleges, require remediation.<sup>6</sup>

Given the strong correlation between education, future income, and other long-term outcomes,<sup>7</sup> these dismal results and low college graduation rates foreshadow future disaster for individuals, for families, for communities, and for the state as a whole.

This is particularly true due to the growing numbers of students who have historically faced significant challenges achieving success in the public schools. During the 2010-

2011 school year, half of our state's 4.9 million students were Hispanic, and the numbers continue to rise.<sup>8</sup> Former Texas state demographer Steve Murdock estimates that from 2000 to 2040, the number of Anglo public school students will drop by approximately 15 percent, while the number of Hispanic students will increase by as much as 213 percent.<sup>9</sup> Thus, by 2040, only 20 percent of the state's public school enrollment will be Anglo.

Given the historically weak educational outcomes for low-income and minority students in Texas, on average, it is no exaggeration to say that the state's future depends on how well we educate all students, including those who face the most daunting odds.<sup>10</sup> Without dramatic improvements in K-12 and post-secondary education, Texas is projected to experience a 12 percent decline in average household income by 2040; a 15 percent increase in the number of households living in poverty; a \$15 billion loss in state tax revenue; and an additional \$1.5 billion per year in incarceration costs.<sup>11</sup> To create a different future, it is clear that we need to fundamentally change what is happening within our public schools.

### Raising the Bar – and Measuring Against It

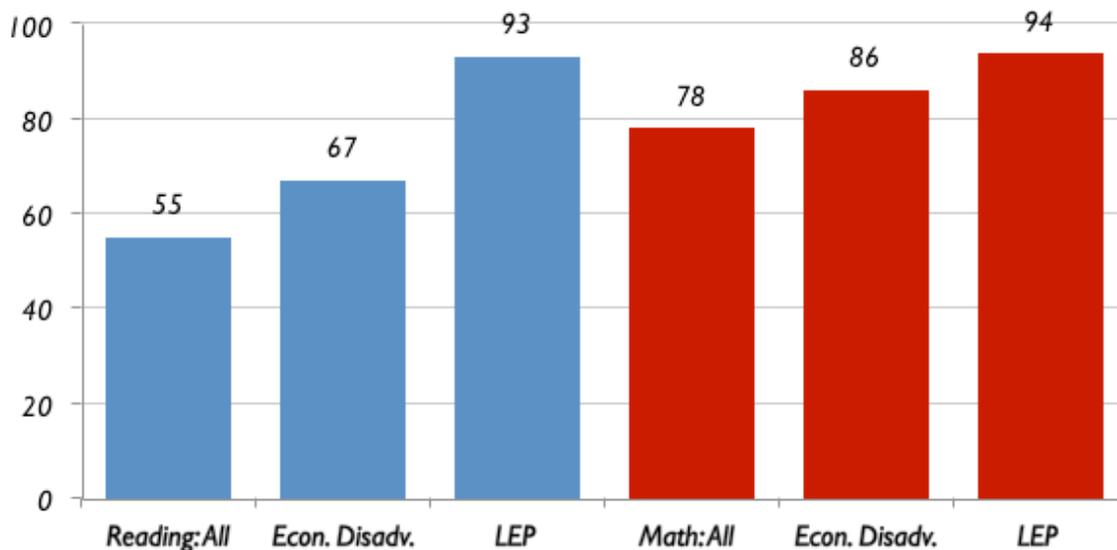
Faced with overwhelming evidence that Texas's public schools have not been preparing large numbers of students for the

demands they will face in today's global economy, the 81st Texas Legislature passed HB 3 (2009), which raised the bar from a goal of basic proficiency for all students to a goal of college readiness.<sup>12</sup> Embedded in the new legislation was a high target: Texas students will rank in the top 10 states nationally in terms of college readiness by 2019-20.<sup>13</sup>

How ambitious is this target? A 2009 analysis funded by the Texas Business Education Coalition (TBEC) and conducted by education researcher Dr. Ed Fuller revealed that the TAKS was giving Texans a false sense of security, since passing the tests did not mean that a student was on track for post-secondary readiness. In fact, Fuller estimated that an 8th grader who passed the TAKS but failed to reach the higher "Commended" level had as low as a 15 percent chance of being on track for college by the 11th grade. Conversely, 8th graders who achieved at the TAKS Commended level were up to five times more likely than their non-Commended peers to remain on track for high school success and to graduate prepared for college without remediation.<sup>14</sup>

TEA data reveal the magnitude of the challenge at hand. In 2011, more than half of Texas's 8th graders did not perform at the Commended level in Reading, and over three-quarters did not perform at the Commended level in Math (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Percentage of Texas 8th Graders Not on Track for Post-secondary Readiness (Percentage of Students Not Reaching Commended Level in TAKS Reading and Math, 2011)**



Source: Texas Education Agency data (2011 TAKS, all administrations, English only).

Note: Econ. Disadv. = students eligible for free or reduced price lunch; LEP = Limited English Proficient students

In light of these findings, Houston A+ Challenge's leadership and staff wanted to know how many Houston-area middle school students – and how many of their peers in other

parts of the state – are at risk of not being on track to reach the higher bar that the state legislature had adopted for all subjects (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Middle School Students in Houston-Area Districts and Statewide ESCs Not on Track for Post-secondary Success, 2011 TAKS**

District Name	Number of Students, Grades 6-8	Percentage of Middle School Students Performing BELOW Commended Level in:		
		Math	Reading	All Subjects
Aldine ISD	12,578	77%	74%	90%
Alief ISD	8,584	79%	68%	88%
Brazosport ISD	2,628	78%	63%	87%
Cy-Fair ISD	23,133	72%	58%	81%
Galveston ISD	1,193	80%	71%	91%
Goose Creek CISD	4,417	71%	67%	84%
Hitchcock ISD	238	85%	77%	92%
Houston ISD	35,078	75%	69%	86%
Humble ISD	7,767	72%	56%	81%
Katy ISD	13,476	63%	51%	75%
KIPP Charter	1,271	70%	62%	84%
Pasadena ISD	10,791	79%	72%	90%
Sheldon ISD	1,433	86%	75%	93%
Spring Branch ISD	6,502	70%	63%	80%
Spring ISD	7,789	86%	72%	92%
Wharton ISD	411	83%	71%	89%
YES Charter	2,593	56%	60%	76%
Houston Region (Region 4 ESC)	225,451	72%	62%	83%

Regional ESC	Region Served	Number of Students, Grades 6-8	Percentage of Middle School Students Performing BELOW Commended Level in:		
			Math	Reading	All Subjects
1	Edinburg	81,750	79%	73%	89%
2	Corpus Christi	22,160	82%	68%	89%
3	Victoria	10,968	80%	67%	88%
4	Houston	225,451	72%	62%	83%
5	Beaumont	16,728	79%	66%	88%
6	Huntsville	36,282	71%	60%	81%
7	Kilgore	35,185	76%	64%	86%
8	Mt. Pleasant	11,680	81%	64%	88%
9	Wichita Falls	7,994	77%	63%	86%
10	Richardson	156,196	71%	60%	81%
11	Fort Worth	115,310	72%	59%	82%
12	Waco	32,127	80%	66%	88%
13	Austin	76,108	70%	58%	80%
14	Abilene	10,245	79%	64%	87%
15	San Angelo	10,052	79%	66%	87%
16	Amarillo	17,143	76%	66%	86%
17	Lubbock	16,738	78%	66%	86%
18	Midland	16,337	82%	71%	90%
19	El Paso	37,127	77%	69%	88%
20	San Antonio	86,411	78%	65%	86%
STATEWIDE		1,021,992	74%	63%	84%

Source: Texas Education Agency data (2011 TAKS, all administrations, English only).

The results of these analyses were alarming: In 2011, 83% of the 225,451 middle school students in the Houston metro region fell short of the “Commended” level in all subjects and were therefore at risk of not being post-secondary ready. Some districts outperformed others, but none of the districts had more than 25 percent of its students on track for success in high school and beyond.

The data validated what Houston A+ Challenge’s staff had been seeing in their work with teachers and school leaders throughout the Houston area for years: that students who enter 9th grade without essential knowledge, skills, and behaviors were facing extremely difficult odds of achieving long-term success.

### **Why Middle Schools Matter**

Houston A+ Challenge is not alone in its belief in the importance of middle school success. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development has called adolescence “the last phase of the life span in which social institutions have reasonably ready access to the entire population, so the potential for constructive influence and for improving adolescents’ life chances is great.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, ACT’s landmark report *The Forgotten Middle* emphasized that “college and career readiness is not a high school issue; it’s a K–12 issue.” More specifically, it underscored that middle school is a critical point for college and career readiness – “one so important that, if students are not on target for college and career readiness by the time they reach this point, the impact may be nearly irreversible.”<sup>16</sup>

These pronouncements about the importance of middle schools have been coupled with abundant documentation of their shortcomings. International assessments have shown that the academic performance of U.S. students tends to lag in middle school.<sup>17</sup> Middle school students with lower initial levels of achievement tend to fare especially poorly.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it seems apt that researcher Cheri Pierson Yecke, in her seminal work entitled *Mayhem in the Middle*, called American middle schools “the places where academic achievement goes to die.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, she emphasized, middle school students in the U.S. “manifest depression, disengagement, fear for physical safety, a desire to drop out, and boredom with schoolwork at rates that exceed those of every industrial nation except Israel.”<sup>20</sup>

Given the widespread recognition that today’s middle schools are failing to give many students the knowledge and skills

they need, it seems remarkable that so little has changed. While a seemingly endless stream of investments and reforms have been focused on the early childhood, elementary, and high school levels, there has been far less attention to middle schools. Reform efforts have focused far more on structural aspects, such as grade configurations, rather than on what happens inside of the building.

### **What Are the Key Elements of Middle School Success?**

Over the past several years, however, the dearth of good research on what it takes to transform middle schools has been addressed, and a growing body of high-caliber studies are providing actionable insights. In early 2010, for example, EdSource published the largest middle school study ever conducted.<sup>21</sup> Led by Trish Williams and Michael Kirst, the study scrutinized a large number of California middle schools in an effort to identify practices and policies that differentiated between higher- and lower-performing schools serving similar student populations.

The researchers found that the highest-performing middle schools had a number of important characteristics in common, the most important of which was that they created “a shared, school-wide intense focus on the improvement of student outcomes.” In particular, these schools:

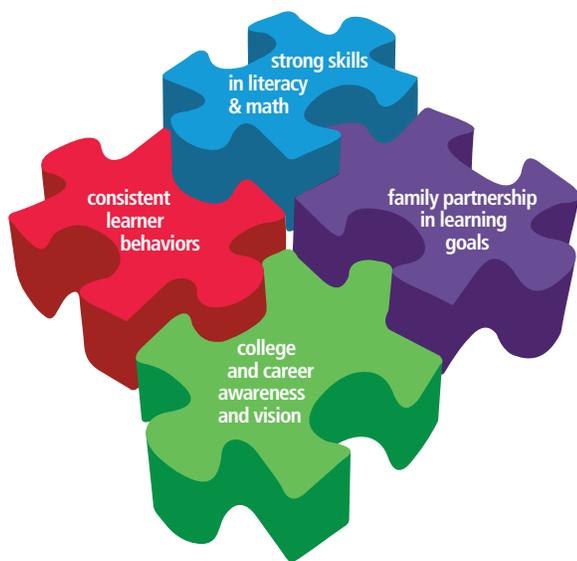
- Set measurable goals on standards-based tests and benchmark tests across all proficiency levels, grades, and subjects;
- Had a “future oriented” school mission, with curricula and instruction designed to prepare students to succeed in a rigorous high school curriculum;
- Included improvement of student outcomes in evaluations of the superintendent, principals, and teachers; and
- Communicated to parents and students their responsibility for student learning, including parent contracts, turning in homework, attending class, and asking for help when needed.

“If it’s important to have more students graduate high school college-ready,” the researchers concluded, “then it’s time to give middle grades educators and their students more attention and support.”<sup>22</sup>

Moving from the school level to the student level, researchers have also identified several key indicators that middle school students are on track for post-secondary success.

## The Middle Years:

### Key Indicators of Student Post-Secondary Success



- **Strong Skills in Literacy and Math** – The academic foundation that students build in middle school, especially in math and literacy, is crucial to their ability to handle rigorous coursework in high school and beyond. Middle school students therefore need access to a high-quality core curriculum that is aligned with post-secondary outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Despite consensus regarding the importance of academic rigor in the middle school years (and throughout the K-12 spectrum), however, research shows that – for many students – middle school is not at all rigorous. This is clearly evident in a recent study from the Center for American Progress (CAP), which explored the academic experiences of eighth graders using survey data gathered as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. For example:

- o 33 percent of Texas eighth graders (and 29 percent of their peers nationally) reported that their math work is often or always too easy;
- o 37 percent of Texas eighth graders (and 30 percent nationally) read fewer than five pages a day at school or for homework;
- o Roughly one-third of students report rarely having to write a lengthy answer on a reading test; and
- o 57 percent of eighth graders nationally said that their history work is often or always too easy for them.

Based on these findings, the CAP study's authors called for more challenging and engaging learning opportunities for all students: "Too many students report not being engaged in class. They don't understand what their teachers are teaching them and they feel like they are not learning. Our nation can – and should – do more."<sup>24</sup>

- **Consistent Learner Behaviors** – Positive learner behaviors help students to stay focused in school, develop effective study habits, and remain engaged in school-related activities.<sup>25</sup> Student behaviors associated with academic success include strong attendance, high levels of engagement, positive conduct, and successful performance in challenging courses. A major study showed that 6th graders who failed math or reading, attended school fewer than 80 percent of school days, or received an unsatisfactory behavior rating in a core course had only a 10 to 20 percent chance of graduating on time.<sup>26</sup> There is also growing evidence that "performance character"<sup>27</sup> can improve students' academic outcomes. Notably, psychology professor Martin Seligman has developed a list of 24 character strengths associated with achievement, including zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence, optimism, and curiosity.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Art Costa's *Habits of Mind* highlights the importance of being able to perform well under challenging conditions. Important dispositions include persisting, thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, creating, imagining, innovating, and thinking flexibly.<sup>29</sup>
- **College and Career Awareness and Vision** – Having college plans by 8th grade is a key precondition for planning high school coursework, maintaining strong academic performance, and ensuring college enrollment.<sup>30</sup> Yet many middle and early high school students have not yet thought about or explored the types of education, training, and work they might pursue after high school.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, although most students say that they intend to pursue post-secondary education, fewer than half report being in a college preparatory program of study. Cultivating awareness of college and what it takes to get there must begin in middle school.
- **Family Engagement in Learning Goals** – Though parental involvement in school-based activities (such as parent-teacher conferences) tends to decline as students get older,<sup>32</sup> family engagement and support can make a tremendous difference because these "foster academic motivation, build confidence, and make academic achievement attainable."<sup>33</sup> This is particularly true for students who will be the first in their family to go to college. To prepare a new generation of students for college and career, all school staff must take ownership for communicating effectively with parents and engaging them in student learning.

Strong academic achievement, consistent learner behaviors, college and career awareness and vision, and family involvement in learning goals are all indicators of a middle school student who is on the path to post-secondary success.

With this research-based roadmap in hand, Houston A+ Challenge set out to partner with middle schools in the greater Houston area to help them develop the internal capacity to successfully promote and support post-secondary readiness for all of their students.

### **An Initiative Is Born**

Believing in the urgency of getting more middle school students “on track” for post-secondary success, Houston A+ Challenge’s leadership and board decided it was time to take a bold step. In 2010, they launched a major new middle school initiative called The Challenge Network. Shaped by the organization’s years of experience working in Houston-area schools and by the growing body of research on what works in middle schools, A+ staff determined that the program design for the Challenge Network should be multifaceted. Rather than just preparing students to perform well on the state assessments, they wanted to ensure that middle school students in the program would have access to a truly high-quality middle school experience that provided the solid foundation needed for success in high school and in life.

Accordingly, the Challenge Network set its sights on four goals:

1. To increase the achievement and college readiness of targeted middle school students, including but going beyond achieving the “Commended” level on the TAKS tests;<sup>34</sup>
2. To increase student achievement for all students in the targeted grades;
3. To improve educational practice and build internal school capacity through hands-on coaching and targeted professional development for teachers and principals; and
4. To embed successful practices within the school to increase the likelihood of long-term impact beyond the first two years of engagement.

Six middle schools in five districts in the Houston metro area were selected for the first cohort of the Challenge Network. Most of the schools chose a single grade level and subject area to focus on, but one school chose to focus on both math and reading. All schools in the Challenge Network implemented six common program components:

### **Challenge Network Program Components**

- **Baseline Analysis of Student Data** – Because students benefit when teachers know their academic history, teachers and school leaders began the school year by analyzing detailed assessment results for students and

using them to create an individualized roadmap for each student’s academic success.

- **Targeted Collaboration Among Teachers and Schools** – Because students benefit when teachers have time to plan together, A+ brought teachers together to share ideas for improving teaching practice and to use assessment results and curriculum resources to plan lessons targeting students’ strengths and weaknesses. Through these collaborations, students gained access to promising practices from across the region.
- **Performance Coaching to Improve Teaching and Learning** – Because students benefit when teachers work continuously to improve their craft and have adequate support for doing so, A+ assigned Performance Coaches to work alongside teachers in classrooms to provide just-in-time feedback and to implement effective lessons, assessments, and interventions.
- **Continuous Assessment FOR Learning** – Because students benefit when teachers give consistent, timely, detailed feedback, A+ Performance Coaches helped teachers provide better feedback to students and determine the next steps for teaching.
- **Family Engagement** – Because students benefit when school staff and families communicate effectively and share common goals for students, Houston A+ Challenge and Communities In Schools worked with school staff to sign student and family commitments and to keep families engaged over time in achieving the goals of the Challenge Network. Furthermore, A+ helped students and families learn about local colleges, applications, and entrance requirements and about potential career paths. Finally, A+ rewarded high-performing students with camping trips that provided valuable enrichment and leadership opportunities – and fun.
- **Extra Instructional Time and Support to Meet Higher Standards** – Because all students benefit from extra support, and many need expanded instructional time, Challenge Network schools committed themselves to providing additional time and support for all students.

In conjunction with the Challenge Network, Houston A+ Challenge operates a Middle School Leadership Academy that cultivates the leadership capacity of school principals and coaches them in developing research-based action plans designed to advance students’ post-secondary success. Each plan is unique, but focused on implementing best-practices common to high-performing middle schools, including effective, student-focused collaboration among teachers and schools and baseline and continual use of student data to inform teaching and enhance learning.

In addition, Houston A+ Challenge recently helped to launch a new collaborative project entitled Gulf Coast Partners Achieving Student Success (PASS), in partnership with the University of Texas at Austin's Community College Leadership Program and the National Institute for Evidence-Based Change project. Through this new initiative, Houston A+ Challenge is helping K-12 districts collaborate more effectively with community colleges. Thus, the organization's multiple programs are all working in tandem to disseminate and embed best practices for improving students' post-secondary readiness.

## **Lessons Learned from the Challenge Network Experience**

Performance coaches worked with the initial cohort of Challenge Network schools throughout the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years. While the evaluation of the second year of the program has not yet been completed, the first year's data showed evidence of multiple positive effects.<sup>35</sup> Not all of the schools achieved significant gains in the numbers of students reaching the "Commended" level on the TAKS, but the data suggested that the reform effort was having a beneficial impact on achievement test scores as well as student behaviors associated with post-secondary success. Researcher Dr. Ed Fuller, who is conducting the evaluation, concluded: "These initial results are very promising and the reform effort should be fully supported by school and district personnel as well as funders and policymakers."

Because some schools had better results than others, A+ staff and coaches focused during the second year of the program (2011-12) on ensuring that all of the reform components were fully implemented in each participating school and on identifying any necessary modifications to the program model.

Beyond the quantitative findings from the Challenge Network, it became clear that staff involved in the initiative and in other A+ programs were accumulating an array of insights about the work of middle schools – and about the various factors that either facilitate or inhibit schools from significantly improving academic outcomes for their students. Accordingly, in the spring of 2012, as the vision for this white paper evolved, researchers interviewed staff and coaches involved in the Challenge Network, asking them to answer a basic yet profoundly important question:

*"Based on your experience working with the Challenge Network schools (and your prior work in education), what do you think are the most significant challenges or barriers to preparing all middle school students for post-secondary readiness? And based on these observations, what changes do you think need to happen, at the school level, at the district administration or school board level, and at the state policy level?"*

The interviewees had a plethora of insights and recommendations, which are summarized in Appendix A. It should be noted that these comments are from a variety of middle schools, so any individual comment may reflect what is happening only at one school or at multiple schools. It is not possible to determine how common or rare the descriptor is among schools at large.

A closer look at the comments and recommendations from interviewees revealed that they fell into several overarching categories, namely: **principal quality and autonomy, school culture, teacher quality, curriculum and assessments (and use of time and resources), and accountability**. These are captured in Figure 2.

It is important to note that each of these areas encompasses a broad spectrum of potential policy and programmatic actions, ranging from relatively small-scale, short-term steps (for example, tweaking existing school schedules or making minor modifications to existing practices) to major reforms that may be highly innovative, bold, and/or long-term – for example, substantially changing staffing patterns, use of time or technology, and so forth. In A+'s forthcoming policy briefs, we will more fully explore the array of options within these categories.

## **Policy Recommendations**

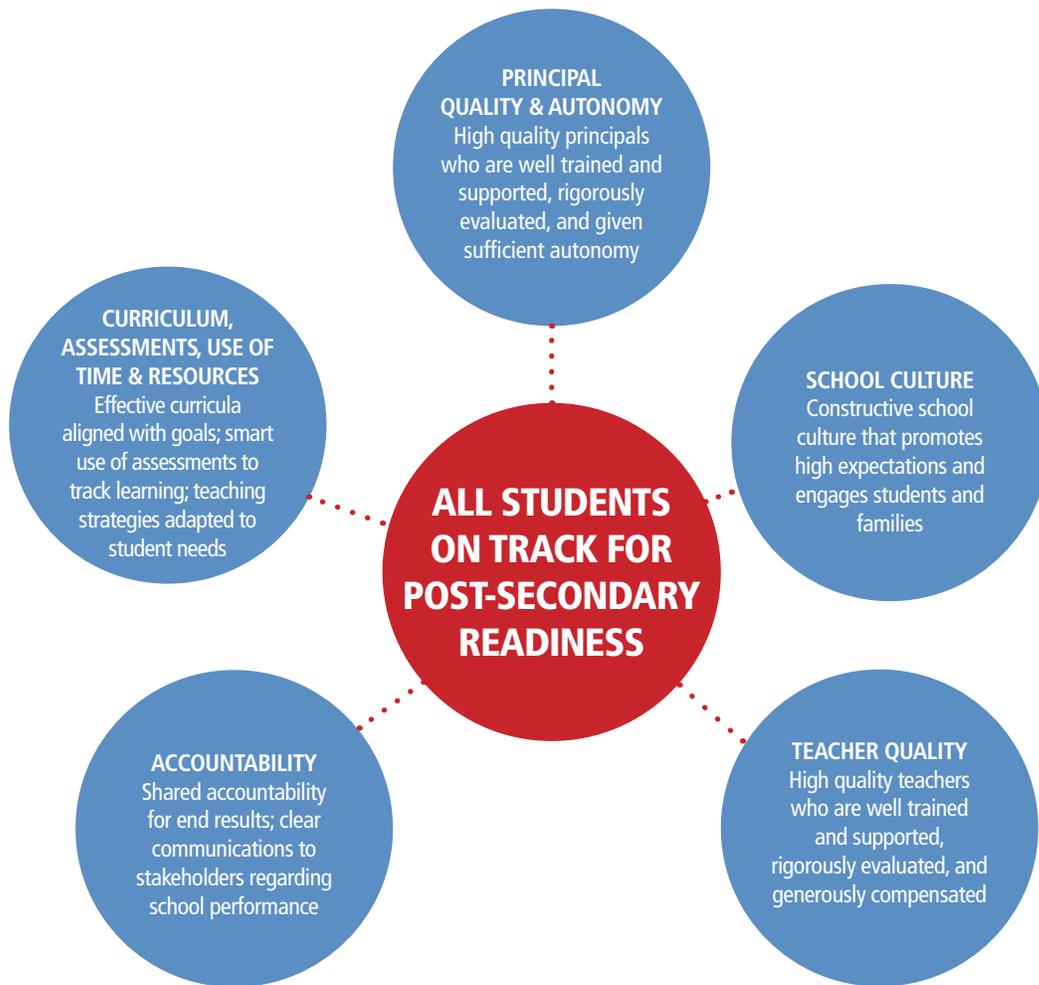
The next logical questions are: What should be done to address these challenges, and who is responsible? Table 2 contains a series of policy recommendations based on the insights gained and lessons learned from the Challenge Network and other A+ programs. We believe that the various policies and actions identified are crucial to dramatically increasing the numbers of middle school students on the path to post-secondary readiness.

As indicated by the check marks in Table 2, responsibility varies. In some cases, A+ believes that state policymakers are primarily responsible for action; in other words, fulfilling the intent of the policy recommendation is likely to require new legislation or rulemaking, or a reallocation of state funding. In other cases, ownership belongs more appropriately to school board members, district administrators, principals, or teachers.

Most often, however, success in fulfilling the intent of the policy recommendations will likely require aligned actions

at multiple levels: state policymakers, district administrators, principals, and classroom teachers. Ensuring that these efforts are aligned will depend on extensive communication and thoughtful collaboration. This is consistent with Houston A+ Challenge's strong belief in the importance of collaborative work involving diverse stakeholders. Over the years, we have seen countless examples of the remarkable progress that can occur when multiple parties are working together toward shared goals.

**Figure 2: Key Elements for Improving Middle Students' Post-secondary Readiness**



**Table 2: Houston A+ Challenge Policy Recommendations – and Ownership**

	Teachers	Principals	School Board & District Admin.	State Policymakers
<b>Principal Leadership &amp; School Culture</b>				
Better preparation and training (organizational change, budget, student achievement, assessment, etc.)			✓	✓
Ongoing professional development and support targeted to needs			✓	✓
Annual evaluations based on student achievement results, the effectiveness of their teachers, parent satisfaction, and market demand for their schools			✓	✓
Accountability for key aspects of role: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Setting high academic expectations for all students</li> <li>- Uniting school staff around shared goals and promoting shared accountability</li> <li>- Establishing and reinforcing a school culture that promotes conditions for success</li> <li>- Providing effective supervision to staff</li> <li>- Engaging families in constructive ways in the school community</li> </ul>		✓	✓	✓
Greater control over key aspects of role, including personnel, schedule, assessments, and budget		✓	✓	
<b>Teacher Quality</b>				
Increase requirements for alternative certification programs so that future teachers are better prepared				✓
Increase the rigor of teacher licensing exams				✓
Ongoing professional development and support targeted to needs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Increase time in school schedule for teachers to plan and collaborate (e.g., study student data, develop ownership of curriculum objectives, share strategies)	✓	✓	✓	
Annual evaluations based on multiple forms of evidence (e.g., value-added student achievement data and classroom observations); evaluation should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specify multiple levels of effectiveness</li> <li>- provide actionable feedback</li> <li>- be used to provide appropriate support and professional development, including mandatory remediation</li> </ul>		✓	✓	✓
Dismiss and terminate licensure for teachers rated ineffective for more than two years after being provided adequate support		✓	✓	✓
End salary schedules tied to years of experience and implement differential compensation based on teacher effectiveness			✓	✓
Eliminate regressive policies and budgeting practices that make it hard for low-income schools to compete for experienced teachers		✓	✓	✓

	Teachers	Principals	School Board & District Admin.	State Policymakers
<b>Curriculum, Assessments, and Use of Time and Resources</b>				
Preserve and embrace annual state assessments required for accountability	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lift class size restrictions, which restrict principals and teachers from using flexible instructional groupings			✓	✓
Ensure that students receive the targeted interventions and support they need	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fund pilot grants to support technology and innovation to expand access to instructional opportunities and provide tutoring and differentiated support for student success				✓
Increase access to rigorous coursework for all students	✓	✓	✓	
Use research-based curriculum and instructional strategies that are proven effective and aligned with college course requirements and skill sets	✓	✓	✓	
Foster joint ownership of curriculum by requiring staff to collaboratively prioritize what students need to learn	✓	✓	✓	
Use instructional groupings creatively and flexibly to address students' learning needs	✓	✓		
Use technology innovatively to expand access to instructional opportunities and provide tutoring and differentiated support for student success	✓	✓	✓	
Use formative assessments appropriately to gauge student learning and inform teaching while avoiding unintended negative consequences, such as excessive testing	✓	✓	✓	
Reexamine/revise grading policies to ensure that grades provide meaningful feedback on student performance	✓	✓	✓	
Create systems and processes for teachers to use data to inform and adapt instruction to student needs, including flexible instructional groupings, tailored intervention strategies, etc.	✓	✓		
<b>Accountability</b>				
Improve data systems to provide timely feedback on student performance to all stakeholders		✓	✓	✓
Phase in more rigorous accountability standards and ensure that schools have the necessary supports to achieve them			✓	✓
Promote shared accountability and alignment of efforts among stakeholders: students, families, teachers, principals, district leaders, etc.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Communicate key information about school performance to all stakeholders in a clear, understandable way to inform school choice and cultivate shared public accountability for results		✓	✓	✓

Because a primary purpose of this paper is to inform and guide state policy, A+ has extracted the state policy recommendations from the above list; these are summarized in Table 3 to follow.

**Table 3:  
Summary of State Policy Recommendations**

### **Principal Leadership & School Culture**

- 1.** Monitor the implementation of SB1383 (approved by the 82nd Legislature) as the Commissioner establishes school leadership standards and indicators of successful school leadership to guide principal training, appraisal, and professional development
  - Key indicators of principals' effectiveness should include student achievement results, the effectiveness of their teachers, parent satisfaction, and market demand for their schools
- 2.** Ensure that principals have significant control over the levers required to create an effective school community, including hiring personnel, providing instructional leadership, and managing schedule, assessments, and budget
- 3.** Ensure that principals receive ongoing professional development and support targeting their needs and adequately preparing them to manage organizational change

### **Teacher Quality**

- 4.** Develop and adopt legislation similar to SB4 (passed by the Senate during the 82nd Legislature), providing for more rigorous standards for teacher certification, continuing education, and evaluation
  - Require annual teacher evaluations based on multiple forms of evidence, including value-added student achievement data and classroom observations
  - Evaluations should specify multiple levels of effectiveness, provide actionable feedback, and be used to provide appropriate support and professional development, including mandatory remediation
  - Teachers who are rated ineffective for more than two years after receiving appropriate support should be dismissed and their license revoked
- 5.** End salary schedules tied to years of experience and implement differential compensation based on teacher effectiveness
- 6.** Eliminate regressive policies and budgeting practices that make it difficult for low-income schools to compete for experienced teachers

- 7.** Increase requirements for alternative teacher certification programs so that future teachers are better prepared
- 8.** Increase the rigor of teacher licensing exams
- 9.** Ensure that teachers receive ongoing professional development and support targeted to their needs

### **Curriculum, Assessments, & Use of Time**

- 10.** Preserve and embrace annual state assessments required for accountability
- 11.** Lift class size restrictions, which restrict principals and teachers from using flexible instructional groupings
- 12.** Ensure that funding for tutoring and remediation follows students to whatever school they attend, and that funds earmarked for accelerated learning and student intervention are available to help all students who are not on track for post-secondary readiness, not just the lowest performing students
- 13.** Ensure that students receive the targeted interventions and support they need, including supporting curriculum and opportunities for remediation or acceleration
- 14.** Fund pilot grants to support technology and innovation to expand access to instructional opportunities and provide tutoring and differentiated support for student success

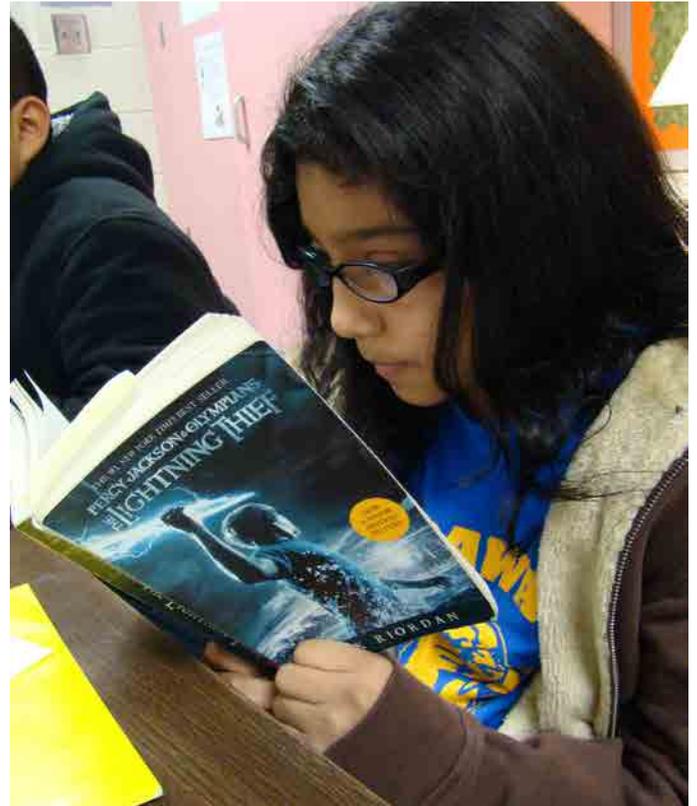
### **Accountability**

- 15.** Improve state and district data systems to provide timely feedback on student performance to all stakeholders
- 16.** Phase in more rigorous accountability standards and ensure that schools have the necessary supports to achieve them
- 17.** Promote shared accountability and alignment of efforts among all stakeholders: higher education and K-12 leaders, business and community leaders, principals, teachers, students, families, etc.
  - K-12 standards must be congruent with the business community's workforce expectations and post-secondary institutions' requirements
- 18.** Communicate key information about school performance to all stakeholders in a clear, understandable way to inform school choice and cultivate shared public accountability for results

## Conclusion

Over the past decade, Texas lawmakers, district leaders, principals, and teachers have taken bold steps to increase student achievement and prepare students for the challenges that will await them beyond high school. These efforts are praiseworthy, but it is clear that they have not gone nearly far enough.

To ensure a bright future for Texas students and their families, for our communities, and for our state as a whole, Texas must transform its middle schools. Houston A+ Challenge hopes that the lessons learned and policy recommendations set forth in this white paper will serve as a useful roadmap for state legislators, district leaders, principals, and teachers, helping them join forces to “move up the middle” so that all students have the opportunity to achieve success in high school and beyond. Our students’ well-being – and our state’s future – depend on it.



**Appendix A:**  
**Synthesis of the Challenge Network Interviews:**  
**Major Challenges to Getting All Middle School Students**  
**On Track for Post-secondary Readiness**

1. *Middle schools vary widely in terms of their “culture of success” – some have it in abundance, while in other schools, there is a tangible sense that the teachers and staff do not believe that their students (primarily low-income and minority students) can achieve at high levels, and they reinforce this every day – for example, through the expectations they set for students, and how they communicate with them.*
2. *District schools can learn a great deal from charter schools about how to create a strong culture of success among students and staff, and about how to engage families in their children’s education.*
3. *Principals make or break the school culture. If they do not lead the way (for example, laying the ground rules for high expectations and achievement-focused behavior among staff and students, rewarding and celebrating success, enforcing consequences), it is extremely difficult for individual teacher leaders within the building to go against the tide.*
4. *Effective teachers working in schools with a dysfunctional culture are often shunned or criticized by other teachers for going against the grain. If the principal does not reinforce and reaffirm effective teachers’ success, they are often isolated and frustrated – and their effective practices do not spread to other teachers.*
5. *Many middle school principals struggle to fulfill their multiple roles, including being instructional leaders, creating a positive school culture, managing human and financial resources, etc.*
6. *Onerous district and state rules and regulations limit principals’ freedom to run their schools.*
7. *There is little opportunity or reward for innovation in many public schools.*
8. *The range in students’ academic levels and needs is one of the biggest challenges that teachers face.<sup>36</sup> For example, one coach worked with a 6th grade teacher whose students ranged from a 1st grade to an 8th grade reading level – yet the school had few books for students across this ability spectrum, so students lacked access to books that “they can and want to read.”*
9. *Schools often have a lot of student data but don’t always know what to do with it. They need effective protocols for analyzing and acting on student data.*
10. *Teachers often do not use data to determine how students are doing, then adapt their teaching practices accordingly. There is a tendency to follow a “one-size-fits-all” approach rather than tailoring instruction, interventions, enrichment, etc. to students’ needs. In other words, they focus far more on what they are teaching than on what students are learning.*
11. *Some middle school students cannot read anywhere near grade level, but were nevertheless able to pass the TAKS, primarily because their teachers constantly drilled them on test preparations rather than meaningful activities that would truly help them learn to read. (Several interviewees expressed a strong hope that the STAAR assessments will be a more meaningful reflection of students’ proficiency.)*
12. *Existing teacher evaluation practices do little to distinguish between effective and ineffective teachers – and because of the uniform salary schedule, there are limited rewards for success or consequences for poor performance.*
13. *Principals are far more likely to “work around” ineffective teachers rather than terminate them. Ineffective teachers and principals tend to be passed around from school to school. Thus, the driving force seems to be what is easiest for adults rather than what it means for students.*
14. *Many schools use curriculum materials that are not research based and not effective. There is often serious misalignment between what is taught and what is tested.*
15. *Too much school time is wasted on activities that have little to do with teaching and learning. For example, schedules often result in excessive amounts of transition/ passing times, and negative school culture often means that teachers have to spend a lot of time serving duty rather than planning, mentoring, etc. Before moving to expand the school day or year, schools should make better use of the time they have.*
16. *School schedules are generally out of sync with students’ needs; too little time is devoted to the highest priorities.*
17. *Schools often expend far too little time and effort communicating with families and engaging them in meaningful ways in their children’s education. For example, in one middle school, parents wanted to know how to help their children choose books at the appropriate reading level, but the teachers had never bothered to help inform them of how to do so.*
18. *Middle school students and their families, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, often have little knowledge of what it takes to be on track for success in high school and college.*
19. *Teachers still tend to work in silos rather than collaboratively, and most schools provide little opportunity or support for deliberate planning.*
20. *Principals and teachers alike need far more meaningful professional development and support.*
21. *As it is with time, so it is with money: public schools may well need more money to achieve higher standards, but first they must make better use of existing resources. A significant amount of money is wasted – for example, quickly expended on trivial expenditures because “the money must be used.”*

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- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Complete College America data; <http://www.completecollege.org/docs/Texas.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> Raj Chetty, John Friedman, and Jonah Rockoff, *The Long-Term Impacts of Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood*, National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper No. 17699, December 2011.
- <sup>8</sup> Texas Education Agency data; [http://www.tea.state.tx.us/acctres/enroll\\_index.html](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/acctres/enroll_index.html).
- <sup>9</sup> Gary Scharer, "Texas Demographer: 'It's basically over for Anglos,'" *Houston Chronicle* [Blog], Feb. 24, 2011.
- <sup>10</sup> Zach Gonzalez, "Steve Murdock: Educating Latinos Vital to Future of U.S." *NewsTaco*, Sept. 26, 2011.
- <sup>11</sup> Steve Murdock et al., *The New Texas Challenge: Population Change and the Future of Texas*, Texas A&M University Press, 2003.
- <sup>12</sup> House Bill 3 is available at: <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlodocs/81R/billtext/pdf/HB00003F.pdf#navpanes=0>.
- <sup>13</sup> Texas's definition of college readiness, from Texas Education Code (TEC) §39.024: "...the level of preparation a student must attain in English language arts and mathematics courses to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in an entry-level general education course for credit in that same content area."
- <sup>14</sup> Edward Fuller, *Are Texas Middle School Students Prepared for High School?* The University of Texas, 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century*, 1995, p.11.
- <sup>16</sup> ACT, *The Forgotten Middle: Ensuring that All Students Are on Target for College and Career Readiness before High School*, 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> As cited in Peter Meyer, "The Middle School Mess," *Education Next*, Winter 2011, Vol. 11(1).
- <sup>18</sup> Jonah Rockoff and Benjamin Lockwood, "Stuck in the Middle," *Education Next*, Fall 2010.
- <sup>19</sup> Cheri Pierson Yecke, *Mayhem in the Middle: How Middle Schools Have Failed America—and How to Make Them Work*, The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2005.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Trish Williams and Michael Kirst, *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better*, EdSource, February 2010. The study was based on an in-depth analysis of middle schools in California.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Institute for Higher Education Policy, *Removing Roadblocks to Rigor*, Pathways to College Network, April 2009.
- <sup>24</sup> Ulrich Boser and Lindsay Rosenthal, *Do Schools Challenge Our Students? What School Surveys Tell Us About the State of Education in the United States*, Center for American Progress, July 2012.
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- <sup>28</sup> Paul Tough, "What if the Secret to Success is Failure?" *The New York Times*, September 14, 2011.
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- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program*, 2007.
- <sup>33</sup> Institute for Higher Education Policy, *Removing Roadblocks to Rigor*, Pathways to College Network, April 2009.
- <sup>34</sup> At each Challenge Network school, A+ staff and coaches worked with teachers to identify 150 students who had passed the TAKS during the previous school year (2009-10) but had not attained the "Commended" level. These students, called "A+ Scholars," were targeted for the most intensive assistance and support, while other program elements were focused on helping all students within the targeted grades.
- <sup>35</sup> The evaluation of the second year of the Challenge Network program is expected to be completed in Fall 2012.
- <sup>36</sup> Michael Petrilli, "All Together Now?" *Education Next*, Winter 2011. The Petrilli article reports that more than 8 out of 10 teachers say that differentiated instruction, or customizing instruction to students' individual needs, is difficult to implement.

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To learn more about Houston A+ Challenge's current and historic work, visit [www.houstonaplus.org](http://www.houstonaplus.org).



## HOUSTON **A+** CHALLENGE

Houston A+ Challenge's mission is to serve as a catalyst for change in the public schools that educate nine of every ten children in our region, teaming with principals and teachers in targeted schools to ensure that every student is prepared for post-secondary success.