

What to Look for When Looking at Middle Schools

What the Research Says about Successful Middle Schools

Why do some middle schools clearly outperform others on standards-based tests even though they serve a similar student population?*

The following notes summarize research presented at past PEN programs by Michael Butler, education expert with Public Works, Inc., a Pasadena-based consulting firm. Mr. Butler suggested questions parents might ask when visiting a school. (We've also added a few questions of our own.)

Rank	Factor	Suggested Questions to Ask
1	Focus on Outcomes	Have groups of teachers set measurable goals set by grade and subject matter on key assessments? What are the school's top 1-3 instructional priorities? Why? How does this school hold teachers and other staff accountable for improving student achievement?
2	Coherent Instruction	What is the focus of teacher collaboration time? How common or consistent are teaching/assessment strategies and approaches?
3	District Support	What is District doing to ensure that students enter 6 th grade ready to work at grade level? What transitional support is there for students promoting from 5 th grade who are not ready to work at 6 th grade level?
4	Teacher Competence	What are teachers doing to adapt, differentiate, or personalize teaching /learning? How do you encourage teachers to share/use best practices?
5	Principal Leadership	How does the principal monitor and evaluate the school's progress?
6	Extensive Use of Data	How is data used to guide the school?
7	Academic Interventions	How does this school proactively identify students who may need additional support? What systems are in place to provide that support?
8	Organization of Time and Instruction	Although these factors were not strongly correlated with student outcomes in the research, PEN recognizes that they matter to parents. Practices associated with higher performing middle schools included:
9	School Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined and enforced dress code; • Zero tolerance for drugs, weapons, and bullying; • Active participation of adults in supervision; • Continuous monitoring to identify students in need of intervention; • Incentives to reward students for positive behaviors.

* **Methods:** 1) surveys of principals, ELA & math teachers, and superintendents for 303 California schools; 2) cross-sectional and longitudinal data on ELA and Math CST scores, 2007-2009; 3) regression analyses to control for student/school demographics and discern the factors most "predictive" of success.