

To: Stephanie Valentine, PRA Clearance Coordinator, U.S. Department of Education
From: Alliance for Excellent Education; Association for Middle Level Education; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; Committee for Children; Learning Policy Institute; National Association of Elementary School Principals; National Association of Secondary School Principals; National Center for Learning Disabilities; and National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform
Date: April 29, 2019
Re: Docket #ED-2019-ICCD-0038: Middle Grades Longitudinal Study of 2017–18 (MGLS:2017), Main Study First Follow-Up (MS2) Tracking and Recruitment and Operational Field Test Second Follow-Up (OFT3) Update

The undersigned organizations appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) notice regarding the necessity and utility of the Middle Grades Longitudinal Study (the Study) Update. As described in the notice for public comment, the Study provides valuable information regarding “academic experiences and development of students during these critical years and will allow researchers to examine associations between contextual factors and student outcomes.” As organizations committed to using data to inform policy, we strongly urge ED to continue to conduct the Study with the proposed update and maintain the comprehensive set of factors and outcomes that are measured.

Transitions throughout a student’s K–12 education are important academically, socially, and for maintaining a college and career trajectory. Many students fall off a strong academic path at these critical moments, whether between elementary and middle school or middle and high school. Risks of the transition between middle and high school are particularly high, as unsuccessful high school transitions can contribute to disengagement, poor academic performance, and higher dropout rates.

Planning for students’ futures, including college and career aspirations, should begin during the critical middle school years. During this time, students should receive opportunities to develop knowledge about careers so that they can explore the wide range of options and consider possible education and career pathways. Collecting data through the Study on the middle school transitional periods, particularly for students with disabilities related to the transition requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is essential to improving the understanding of causes of unsuccessful transitions and providing more appropriate and effective supports to students to improve their success.

The Study also includes survey data on students’ attitudes and behavior, school and classroom environments, and information about social, emotional, and academic outcomes for the purpose of providing “a deeper understanding of the social and contextual factors related to students’ academic and non-academic outcomes.”¹ Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a broad and multifaceted concept that the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defines as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.²

Well-implemented programs designed to foster SEL are associated with positive outcomes, ranging from better test scores and higher high school graduation rates to improved social behavior.³ Social and emotional competencies include (1) skills, such as the ability to collaborate, self-regulate, or make responsible decisions; (2) academic mindsets, such as thinking positively about how to handle challenges; and (3) habits, such as coming to class prepared to learn. Building these competencies improve students' interpersonal skills, including their ability to interact positively with peers and adults, to resolve conflicts, and to work in teams—all contributing to effective learning and productive behavior. Through the explicit teaching of SEL skills, students also gain a sense of agency that supports resilience and perseverance.⁴

Multidisciplinary research is providing a more comprehensive understanding of how adolescents learn and develop highlighting the broad range of factors that should be considered when educating students. These include physiological factors, such as the stage of neural pathway development that occurs during adolescence and the environmental influences of that maturation process; cognitive factors, such as the increasing capacity of adolescents to solve complex problems; as well as psychological and social factors, such as self-identity development, the increasing importance of peer relationships, and various, sometimes conflicting, self, cultural and societal expectations.⁵ Connecting adolescent learning and development research to studies of middle education policies and practices is essential for their effective implementation. Data from well-designed measurement tools, like the Study, help policymakers and educators make strategic decisions about needed investments in student services, programs, and professional development.

Research shows that these types of investments in the middle years are extremely important. An econometric analysis conducted by Dr. James Heckman of the University of Chicago and Dr. Flavio Cunha of Rice University finds that while investments in early childhood are extremely important, they do not yield peak returns on their own. The analysis finds that disadvantaged young people who received balanced intervention *throughout* childhood, as opposed to early childhood intervention only, had increased high school graduation rates; increased college enrollment; and decreased conviction rates, probation, and welfare enrollment. Moreover, a series of studies published by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research finds that the transition between eighth and ninth grade is a key turning point for students as course performance in ninth grade is shown to be predictive of high school graduation.⁶

Despite these findings, federal funding for middle and high schools is paltry compared to federal investments in early childhood, elementary schools, and postsecondary education. For Fiscal Year 2019, federal funding for birth–grade 5 was \$35.53 billion and funding for postsecondary education was \$32.93 billion; yet grades 6–8 received just \$5.82 billion and grades 9–12 received only \$7.50 billion.⁷ This “[missing middle](#)” in federal funding by grade spans is unlikely to yield the greatest returns. Results from the Study, the first of its kind for this age group, will provide a better understanding of the supports adolescent-aged students, including adolescent-aged students with disabilities, need for academic success, high school readiness, and positive life development.

The undersigned organizations appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the Study

Update. Maintaining the collection of a comprehensive set of data that can inform efforts to support students' middle academic years is critical. Please contact us if additional information would be useful.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Excellent Education
Association for Middle Level Education
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
Committee for Children
Learning Policy Institute
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

Notes

- ¹ National Center for Education Statistics, *Middle Grades Longitudinal Study of 2017-18 (MGLS:2017) Main Study Base Year (MS1), Operational Field Test First Follow-up (OFT2), and Tracking and Recruitment for Main Study First Follow-up (MS2), Supporting Statement Part A* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, July 2017).
- ² Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. "What Is SEL?," <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/> (accessed March 27, 2017).
- ³ D. Osher et al., "Advancing the Science and Practice of Social and Emotional Learning: Looking Back and Moving Forward," *Review of Research in Education* 40, no. 1 (2016): 644–81; J. A. Durlak et al., "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions," *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 405–32.
- ⁴ L. Darling-Hammond and C.M. Cook-Harvey, *Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2018).
- ⁵ R. Harper, *Science of Adolescent Learning: How Body and Brain Development Affect Student Learning* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018), <https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Science-of-Adolescent-Learning-How-Body-and-Brain-Development-Affect-Student-Learning.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2019); R. Harper, *Science of Adolescent Learning: Risk Taking, Rewards, and Relationships* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018), <https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Science-of-Adolescent-Learning-Risk-Taking-Rewards-and-Relationships.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2019); R. Harper, *Science of Adolescent Learning: Valuing Culture, Experiences, and Environments* (Washington DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018), <https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Science-of-Adolescent-Learning-Valuing-Culture-Experiences-and-Environments.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2019).
- ⁶ R. Niebling and P. Lovell, *Never Too Late: Why ESEA Must Fill the Missing Middle* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015), <https://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/NeverTooLate/> (accessed October 5, 2017).
- ⁷ For more information, see Alliance for Excellent Education, *Missing Middle—Federal Funding by Grade Span, Fiscal Year (FY) 2019*, <https://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/missing-middle-federal-funding-by-grade-span-fiscal-year-fy-2019/> (accessed April 24, 2019).