Working Paper:

Leading for Young Adolescent Development: Prioritizing What We Know Matters

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Introduction

In recent decades, a number of structural and organizational changes to U.S. schooling have been made in an effort to respond to adolescent student needs. Middle level education has typically included some combination of grades five through nine or roughly aligned age group ranging from 11 to 16 years of age (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The recognition that these adolescent students are developmentally different than other students has been evident through decades of various and ongoing reform initiatives, including the formal construction of middle or junior high schools or informal grouping of students in middle grades (Balfanz, Rodriguez, & Brasiel, 2013; Clark & Clark, 1994; George W. Bush Institute, 2017). However, there is little research specifically on leadership related to young adolescents (Klar & Brewer, 2014) or evidence that these numerous reforms have improved outcomes for students (Midgley & Edelin, 1998).

Public perception that consistently maintains that middle schools are a "weak link" in the education system (Bradley & Manzo, 2000; Manzo, 2008) is unsurprising given the myriad challenges to effectively educating young adolescents. Many of these—young adolescent development; climate, culture, and community; and teaching and learning—have been highlighted in the other papers in this series. Collectively, these numerous challenges at the individual, interpersonal, classroom, and building levels implicate school and district leadership as critical to envisioning, establishing, maintaining, and evolving a school to best educate adolescents.

The myriad challenges to effectively educating adolescents seems to circle back to establishing educational systems in which adults at different levels (i.e., district, school, and classroom) and across roles (e.g., chief academic officer, principal, counselor, and teacher) are all pulling in the same direction. This is not a new or profound notion. The enactment has always been the challenge for many reasons, some of which we acknowledge below. In this paper, we attempt to address a few critical issues somewhat linearly although they are interconnected. We also attempt to discuss each issue at multiple

levels and for multiple roles in hopes of driving a more shared, synergistic commitment to young adolescent education. First, we discuss the importance of establishing a shared vision across levels. Without it, we believe it unlikely that expectations, resources, instructional practices, or practically any other aspect important to education will be appropriately aligned. We then turn to consider organizational structures, presuming that a shared vision should inform the shape of those structures. Next, we pivot to focus on developmentally responsive leadership, relative trust, and instructional leadership as three critical issues directly relevant to student engagement and learning. We conclude with a brief summary that transitions to some possible ways forward.

Shared Vision

District leadership is responsible for establishing a clear, focused, strategic framework of core beliefs and goals that shape the school vision (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). Among other things, district leadership should ensure collaborative goal setting with and for schools and then allocate resources to support the pursuit of those goals (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Thus, district leaders likely need to carefully consider their educational priorities for young adolescent students and subsequently arrange resources and supports to achieve them (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Petersen, 1999). This requires increased internal alignment that removes silos and empowers district leaders to all pull in the same direction (Honig, 2009). By being clear internally about what they are trying to accomplish for young adolescent learners, district leaders should be more able to provide guidance and support for school leaders, as well as hold them accountable for performance aligned to the vision (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Clearer expectations and priorities should result in district leaders being more adept at responding to school leaders', teachers', and students' needs (Yatsko, Lake, Nelson, & Bowen, 2012). The cultivation, cohesion, and coherence (Fullan, 2005, 2006; Fullan & Quinn, 2016) of system-wide goals for young adolescent education should increasingly become vertically aligned. Such vertical alignment would simultaneously recognize adolescent

development during the middle school years and what is often an actual educational transition between elementary and secondary schools (Clark & Clark, 1994), which requires the development and support of school leadership who can bridge both student adolescent developmental needs and organizational structural demands.

Increased district guidance on it priorities for middle grades education should also provide school leaders, especially the principal, with the parameters within which to develop a compelling educational vision. Effective middle school principals and school leadership teams are able to establish a vision that is meaningful across stakeholders—students, parents, and teachers—and that guides decisions, including informing long-term and intermediate goals (Duke, Carr, & Sterrett, 2013). Such principals are also able to effectively communicate the vision and related goals in ways that inspire and motivate (Murphy & Torre, 2015). They recognize that the ways in which the school is organized and managed are critical to achieving the vision (Duke, 2015); that is, how the school is organized is directly related to what the vision is or, at least, should be.

Perhaps the most critical way that the principal and school leadership team advance a vision is to involve other key stakeholders—prioritizing teacher leaders—in its creation and establishment. There is recognition throughout the building that teacher perspectives matter and that the co-creation of the vision and subsequent improvement planning process is a collaborative one (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007). By participating in the process, teacher leaders provide an important practitioner perspective while representing their colleagues, which should result in increased levels of commitment to the vision across the school (Murphy & Torre, 2015). This shared ownership of the vision is then more consistently and clearly conveyed to parents, students, and other stakeholders (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011).

Organizational Structures

The vision that district and school leaders advance regarding adolescent education should drive organizational decisions at both levels. A brief history of how schools have been structured for adolescents underscores how labels, structures, and vision and mission are intertwined. Traditional school structures that still exist in rural or small-school settings organized students into an 8-4 pattern (which can informally be arranged in K-12 schools, too) in which students from kindergarten or Grade 1 through Grade 8 attended one school and then transitioned into a high school. According to Manning (2000), this organizational pattern typically prepared "students with opportunities for basic skills and vocational training and prepared a smaller number to attend college" (p. 192), but the educational and developmental needs of adolescents were generally inadequately met. The advent of the junior high school model that typically enrolled students in Grades 7 through 9 provided enriched academic programs for college-bound students and vocational programs for others (Manning, 2000). Some consideration of young adolescent needs was fostered, but practically such schools were often run as high schools for younger students (Clark & Clark, 1994). The middle school, however, was later developed as an extension of many junior high school academic developments while eschewing some traditional high school elements such as competition and subject matter orientation in favor of team teaching and interdisciplinary learning (Manning, 2000). Although some distinctions might be less clear now, Clark and Clark (1994) define the middle level school as "a separate school designed to meet the special needs of young adolescents in an organizational structure that encompasses any combination of grades five through nine, wherein developmentally appropriate curricula and programs are used to create learning experiences that are both relevant and interactive" (p. 6).

Organizational structures not only account for instruction but also support meaningful student-student, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, and other relationships (Waters & Marzano, 2007). Alternative approaches to education might benefit young adolescents. For example, a number of scholars

and practitioners have argued that heterogeneous and cooperative group arrangements of students can positively influence learning (Bickmore, 2011; Villa & Thousand, 2005). In Norwegian schools, Leuven and Ronning (2016) found that mixed grade classrooms can result in greater learning if the classrooms are well balanced. Others contend that single-gender schools or classrooms within schools might increase social comfort to produce greater educational outcomes (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2004), specifically addressing gender-based achievement gaps (Mulholland, Hansen, & Kaminski, 2004; Tully & Jacobs, 2010). These are but two potential ways to provide developmentally responsive educational opportunities—which we discuss in detail below—jointly with meaningful relationships is critical to setting the stage for the types of instructional leadership work necessary to change academic outcomes for young adolescents. In other words, the decisions made to shape organizational structures have far-reaching effects on student engagement and learning.

Organizational structures can refer to myriad types of structural components within a school. It is not possible to narrowly focus on one specific component, as middle schools are intricately intertwined to meet the needs of the whole child. For example, Ellerbrock and Keifer (2013) found that the cultivation of interdisciplinary teaming and its complementary structures (e.g. flexible block scheduling, homeroom, and extended teacher planning time) promoted "a developmentally responsive middle school environment" (p. 180). In addition, they found the unstructured lunch – an opportunity for students to informally connect – to also contribute to that environment.

Of course, all of these structural considerations are bounded by fiscal, operational, and opportunity costs. Central office must lead by example by strategically spending on facilities, programs, and professional development specifically tailored to advance the health, wellness, safety, and learning of young adolescent students (NMSA, 2003). Moreover, district leadership is responsible for identifying resources for and developing public support of their students and schools (Wheelock, 1998). This leadership should model for flexible, but responsible, fiscal decisions from the principals of schools

enrolling young adolescents. A professional development cost framework (e.g., Odden, Archibald, Fermanich, & Gallagher, 2002) could be leveraged to drive decisions based on cost-benefit analyses specific to young adolescent growth—to make the professional development work for the situation (Guskey, 2000). In short, financial considerations should map directly back to the vision that district leadership and school principals and leadership teams establish (Meyers, in press).

Given that many structures and conditions established by district central office and school leaders can advance young adolescent learning, including various schooling configurations, school leaders must be able to maneuver the organizational structure and processes to coordinate with district goals, school leadership capacity, and teachers' abilities (e.g., Cobb, McClain, Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; Anderson, Leithwood, & Strauss, 2010). There is little evidence that a charismatic school principal can effectively sustain outcomes for students without accounting for and developing skills of others and planning to enact shared or distributed leadership practices (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Thus, school leaders design the organization to be responsive to adult and student skills, abilities, and preferences, and then provide necessary supports to develop adults' skills and knowledge about working with early adolescents (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). Driving this organizational planning is an attention to developing students' intrinsic motivation, understanding their social and psychosocial developmental needs, and connection to the school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

A Few Examples of Structural Considerations

We first highlight a case study example of a successful transition from a junior high school (7-9 grades) to a middle school (6-8 grades) model (Schrum & Levin, 2013). During this transition process organizational structures that were considered as a part of the reform effort included the curriculum, staff positions, and a new facility with pods. This case of a successful conversion revealed innovative approaches to instructional staffing, including a cultural mind-shift revolving around who would teach what subjects and grade levels. Teachers did not teach within a specific grade level, rather they taught

within their endorsement area. Innovative electives were brought into the school, as well as the use of innovative technology. New systems were put into place with both staff and parents to allow collaboration. In an additional way to adhere to a developmentally responsive mindset, there was an acknowledgement by the educational staff that not every student fit into the original elective structure and there was a need to develop new, individualized electives that met students' need. Adding to the structural change was a different approach to weekly grade-level and content-area meetings. There was less delineation between the two types of meetings and instead a transition to a more holistic approach to focus on student needs by attending to varied purposes, including grade-level teachers and content experts, using data, and embedding spiraled curriculum (Schrum & Levin, 2013).

Another common structural consideration for adolescent education is the cultivation of learning communities. Effective middle schools that are developmentally responsive often use smaller learning community structures (Villavicencio & Grayman, 2012). These types of structures, ones that promote interactions and community-building, contribute to teacher learning and growth as well as overall student success (Desimone, 2009). Further, these small learning communities enable both teachers and administrators to understand their students more deeply and address their various emergent developmental needs. Villavicencio and Grayman (2012) found principals in turnaround middle schools "took specific measures to create smaller learning communities, including establishing learning academies that focus on specific themes and looping across grades" (p. ES 4-5). This approach allows interdisciplinary teaming, which is flexible, responsive, and integrated, with an aim of providing a safe, secure, and appropriate environment for young adolescents to learning challenging content

Districts also can help schools reschedule to make time for professional learning within the school day. Schrum and Levin (2013) found in their study on exemplary cases of leadership that a middle school principal who employed flexible scheduling was able to provide innovative professional learning opportunities. The schedule had built in early release days, professional development spread across the

year where teachers had time to look at data, and a summer institute for staff. The district itself used an evolving strategic plan to be responsive to school needs.

Developmentally Responsive Leadership

A primary consideration in reimagining education for young adolescents is the establishment of developmentally responsive leadership throughout the system. A developmentally responsive leader possesses an awareness of and empathy for physical, emotional, and psychosocial development of adolescent learners (Gale & Bishop, 2014). At the district level, this necessitates prioritizing principal and teacher hiring practices that emphasize "best fit," which includes the identification of competencies (Hitt, Woodruff, Meyers, & Zhu, 2018) and beliefs (Hallinger & Heck, 1998) of candidates that most align with developmentally appropriate interactions. Bishop and Downes identify some of these—including fostering belonging, student-centered learning, and teaching growth mindset—in Paper 3. Moreover, district leadership has an obligation to provide professional development opportunities for leaders and teachers of adolescents to learn more about how to improve interpersonal, instructional, and other forms of engaging adolescent learners (Kendziora & Osher, 2016).

Research literature suggests that effective middle school principals share a number of characteristics. Among them, effective principals value working with young adolescents and show a passion for middle level education. As such, they have a concern for the well-being of everyone in the school. Their commitment to democratic involvement is evident in how they develop relationships (Bickmore, 2011). They work tirelessly to build and maintain "an inviting, supportive, and safe environment" (National Middle School Association, 1995, 2003). In that vein, they also articulate and commit to high expectations for all members of the learning community, ensuring adult advocates exist for each student and strategically building family and community partnerships.

In that vein, Brown and Anfara, Jr., with Gross (2002), proposed a three-dimensional model nearly 20 years ago that still seems relevant but remains understudied. To lead middle schools effectively, they contend that a developmentally responsive principal would be responsive to the:

1. Developmental needs of middle grades students.
2. Kind of faculty most likely to connect well and celebrate middle grades learners and understand the development needs of this kind of faculty as they mature through their career and life cycle.
3. Developmental needs of a middle school, operating in a district, guide by a state and likely tested by a national assessment, yet able to see potential for developing and sustaining innovation for middle level education. (pp. 150-153)

Collectively, these points suggest that middle level principals must mediate and balance "between firmness, fairness, exploration, energy, developmental needs, personal relationships, and all the social aspects relevant to young adolescents" (p. 34). This balancing act extends to how middle school principals recruit and develop teachers to be student-centered, interested in both the students as individuals and the content areas they teach (Brown & Anfara, Jr., 2002).

In Gale and Bishop's (2014) study, they found "responsiveness" to be a critical component for effective middle school leadership. Principals who had empathy for their students through an understanding of adolescent development was central to their success. This includes physical, social, and psychosocial development (Gale & Bishop, 2014). They also found that "these participants drew direct connections between the developmental needs of their students and the leadership approaches they adopted" (p. 6). Bishop and Downes speak in much more detail about this in Paper 3 by highlighting approaches to teach early adolescents effectively as well as the importance of recruiting teachers suited to those approaches and/or providing professional development to teachers who could use further development in those areas.

The work to provide developmentally responsive leadership extends to teacher leaders who play a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge, understanding, and practices that are responsive to the needs of adolescent learners. As leaders of learning (Dufour & Marzano, 2011), teacher leaders can demonstrate how to weave good instruction with, or in service of, caring about students collectively and as individuals (Noddings, 2006). In this way, teacher leaders can "share the lead" by "creating a resilient school culture" (Patterson & Patterson, 2004, p. 74) steeped in concern for adolescent development.

Despite sometimes having their roles reduced or confined, school counselors are well placed to provide developmentally responsive leadership. The position of school counselor exists to serve student needs (Galassi & Akos, 2004). They have opportunities to interact with students outside of academic content and develop personal relationships not defined by letter grades (Fitch & Marshall, 2004).

Counselors can leverage their expertise and role to create developmental opportunities for young adolescents that principals and teachers often cannot (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2006). Middle school counselors, in particular, are essential in helping students acquire effective interpersonal skills, manage emotions, explore career interests, and realize their academic potential. This is achieved through the design of specific counseling programming goals based on the school's academic, attendance, and behavioral data. Since 2003, school counselors have been trained to provide comprehensive counseling services through the framework of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. The ASCA National Model reflects a comprehensive approach to the foundation, delivery, management, and accountability of school counseling programs and provides a template to ensure equitable services for all students (ASCA, 2012). In addition, the ASCA National Model provides school counselors with an intentional framework to connect program goals and objectives to local, state, and national accountability standards, while challenging school counselors to serve as advocates, leaders, and partners in systemic change. Given the developmental aspects and ecological factors associated with middle school,

counselors at this level have a unique and specialized role in removing obstacles and providing a foundation for future success (Akos, 2005; ASCA, n.d.).

Relational Trust

Perhaps not surprisingly, the quality of interpersonal social exchanges in group settings among adults and students, or relational trust, has an impact on student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). As noted in other papers, for young adolescents the development of trusting relationships with adults that include autonomy and support is a critical developmental need. Local policies and school structures can expand or hinder opportunities for school leaders, teachers, and students to have intentional opportunities to build trust in developmentally aligned ways. Moreover, relational trust for young adolescents is likely built in ways that are different than for other ages (e.g., Flanagan & Stout, 2010). In Paper 1, Williams and colleagues identify a number of developmental processes young adolescents are undergoing that contribute to increased levels of vulnerability. Debnam and Bottiani extend this concern in Paper 2, noting how adults in the building and community address issues of engagement, safety, and environment to create school climates conducive to adolescent learning. Thus, we again underscore the earlier point that district leaders must be intentional in how they set policy and expectations for how adults will work with each other, how schools are organized, and the ways in which school leaders and teachers will be developed.

Positive relationships are developed by a promotion of trust in others. It should be noted that a climate of trust and "buy-in" from teachers does not happen overnight (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011). "[I]nvestment in personal capital is earned through hard work and one-to-one conversations with teachers on their own terms." (p. 40). Honesty and openness can contribute to the development of positive relationships in middle schools (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011).

The foundational work to build relational trust becomes evident as it flourishes among teachers and others. Teacher engagement increases (Bird, Wang, Watson, & Murray, 2009). Cohesion among

teachers and between teachers and school administrators grows (Price, 2012). The ways in which teachers collaborate change (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006), perhaps most clearly in focused conversation on instruction and students in structured ways such as professional learning communities (Louis, 2006). That is, increased trust amongst teachers seems to result in more intentional, engaged efforts to support adolescents. These efforts can be enhanced by school counselors when they are encouraged to share data and other student information strategically (e.g., Dimmitt, 2003; Schneider, Judy, Ebmeyer, & Broda, 2014).

Instructional Leadership

The effective management of curriculum and instruction by school principals, referred to as instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003), is frequently facilitated or hindered by district policy, practice, and infrastructure (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2007). Thus, it is critical that districts "match skilled educators to schools that fit their strengths and nurture principals' knowledge and skills so they can, in turn, work with teachers to build a culture focused on teaching and learning for understanding" (Wheelock, 1998, pp. 172-173). This entails stabilizing professional staff and taking proactive steps to assign principals who are strong instructionally to lead middle grades instruction, including more autonomy in teacher hiring and firing than might be typical (Wheelock, 1998).

Effective middle school principals build on their characteristics and leverage their skill sets to provide varied, relevant educational opportunities for adolescents. They ensure that curriculum is "relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory" (Bickmore, 2011, p. 2). They provide instructional coaching and supports that underscore being responsive to learner interests and needs. In other words, they set up structures to grow their teachers' instructional approaches to account for the diversity of adolescents while recognizing that students' physical, mental, and emotional development varies considerably during this transitional period (Marks & Printy, 2003). Principal leadership responsibilities are related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment were found to be positively correlated with student

achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Further, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found "the impact on student outcomes is notably greater than that of transformational leadership" (p. 658).

This laser-like focus should help teachers become instructionally sound (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011). In part, this is due to teachers increasingly embracing a framework of shared leadership (Lambert, 2002) in which they take ownership of their own and other teachers' learning. Shared instructional leadership empowers teachers to engage in their own learning and critically consider how to shape instruction to meet adolescents' learning needs (Marks & Printy, 2003). Attention to high-quality, rigorous, and relevant instruction permeates throughout the decisions made by school leaders and teachers (e.g., Neumerski, 2013).

Distributive Leadership Practices

Angelle (2010) found effective principals distributed certain decisions to teams, such as scheduling teachers and advisory content, because the teachers were more knowledgeable about what was needed for those decision points. Expertise in this case was found at the instructional level, rather than an assumption of expertise always resting at the administrative or organizational level. Teachers were also given the discretion to re-organize the schedule based on instructional need. This collaborative approach was found to be rooted in trust (Angelle, 2010). Sanzo, Sherman, and Clayton (2011) found "that a well-organized, shared leadership structure was important to maintain a successful school" (p. 36). Methods through which this took place included developing a sound organizational structure, promotion of collaboration, and cultivation of team building (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011).

Researchers espouse the strong merits of employing distributive leadership in order to build staff capacity and promote achievement (Elmore, 2004; Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz & Louis, 2009; Spillane, 2005; Spillane, 2006). In a distributed leadership model, leading a school requires more than just a principal's knowledge and skill set – the principal must be able to effectively work with others in order to enact the vision and direction of the school. "Depending on the particular leadership task, school leaders'

knowledge and expertise may be best explored at the group or collective level rather than at the individual leaders' level" (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001, p.25).

According to Gurr and Dyrsdale (2012), now more than ever it is imperative that secondary teacher leader, or "middle level leaders", are integrated into schools. "In this era of dispersed leadership and school change focused on the personalization of learning and employing twenty-first century curriculum and pedagogy, their role should be crucial" (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012, p 55). Reform efforts that include developing the capacity of all staff within the school contributes to increased student achievement (Anfara, 2012).

Teacher leaders are those that both hold some leadership role within the school (typically an informal leadership role), as well as having classroom-level responsibilities (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Rather than a "traditional" hierarchical leadership model, a distributed leadership model where responsibilities are shared, engages different people within the school at different leadership levels to address problems of practices related to student learning and development (Leithwood, Jantzi, & McElheron-Hopkins, 2006). Teacher leaders lead initiatives such as student governance, instruction, team level processes, student activities, and certain operational tasks (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Given the "team-based" nature of middle schools, a distributed leadership model that embraces and employs teacher leaders is critical.

Conclusion, Key Takeaways and Implications for Practice

Young adolescents experience physical, emotional, social, and psychological changes, which make educating them a unique undertaking. We have highlighted a number of areas where educational leaders can, and should, be more thoughtful. These areas are interconnected and depend on leaders at all levels to consistently ask how their policies, programs, initiatives, and interactions are intentional and aligned to affect adolescent growth, development, and achievement (National Middle School Association, 2003). The message woven throughout this paper is not new: Distinct elements designed to improve

adolescent outcomes "work best as parts of a larger whole (National Middle School Association, 2003, p. 2; Clark & Clark, 1994; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011; Wheelock, 1998). This demands a combination of urgency, intentionality, consistency, and understanding of young adolescent developmental needs throughout the educational system.

At the district level, there seem to be many opportunities to prioritize middle schools that have not been advanced consistently. Burgeoning research on leading low-performing schools suggests that central offices in larger districts can establish subunits within districts or in smaller districts prioritize funding and personnel in strategic efforts to pursue equitable outcomes for students (Harris, 2011; Meyers, in press). Districts could rethink how to allocate finances, assign personnel, or reorganize schools (e.g., scheduling structures) to provide young adolescents with the people and resources that will better address their various developmental needs (e.g., Honig, 2012; Honig, & Venkateswaran, 2012).

Of the many ways this could be accomplished, we highlight two. First, hiring, placement, and professional development decisions for all adults—principals, counselors, teachers, etc.—working with young adolescents could center more on the developmental needs of the students. For example, some districts are increasingly using a competencies framework to determine the best fit for principals within the district. A competency framework could easily be adapted to account for principal candidate attributes, knowledge, and beliefs about young adolescents and their developmental needs (e.g., Hitt, Woodruff, Meyers, & Zhu, 2018). Similarly, professional development for principals and others could center on how best to understand and respond to discipline, academic, and other challenges at the middle school level.

Second, more consideration could be given to designing adult collaborations with students in mind. For example, principals and counselors have different trainings that should result in different skill sets. Those skill sets frequently manifest in isolation. Intentional strategies to build collective ownership to address student developmental needs could go a long ways to establish a more focused consideration of

the whole child. Collaborative relationships between administration and school counselors are critical in order to effectively implement a comprehensive school counseling program (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Consistent, open communication provides opportunities to develop mutual goals, share information to improve student success, and foster systemic change within a school. School counselors are vital members of school improvement and leadership teams, and work diligently to create a safe environment that is conducive to student success (ASCA, 2012).

If aligned in vision and organizational structure, there then should be opportunities for the district and principals to carefully craft professional development for teachers. Sanzo, Sherman, and Clayton (2011) found that successful principals focus on instructional activities, data utilization, and team building. Principals' use of professional development should be carefully planned out with attention to baseline and pre-existing processes in place at the middle grades. For example, Pantoliano (2005) suggests analysis of instructional practices of classroom teachers would have made a difference in the design and implementation of a professional development initiative at a middle school under study. In Pantoliano's research study, a block schedule was intentionally developed for a middle school, but the professional development plan was not specialized in respect to understanding and analyzing the implementation of instructional strategies use which may have affected implementation.

We close by reiterating and then extending what we believe many already know. The changes young adolescents experience require education that focuses on continuity, social connectedness, and engagement (Juvonen, 2007); disrupts disengagement immediately (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007); and is fair and just (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Leaders across the system must be consistent in the ways they engage young adolescents to be able to then educate them.

Key Takeaways and Implications for Practice

- Educational leadership is not limited to a level, role, or individual but should be organized and distributed in ways designed to ensure interactions with and instruction for young adolescents that are developmentally appropriate.
- A vision shared by district and school leaders and developed with teachers, parents, and students is critical to focus and shape how educational priorities are enacted for young adolescent learners.
- The structural decisions made at the district, school, and classroom levels have considerable ramifications for how young adolescents experience school in terms of teaching and learning but also safety, climate, cultural relevance, relationships, and other personally relevant ways.
- Young adolescent students need educational leaders to be vigilant about ensuring developmentally responsive interactions that prioritize personal relationships that recognize the many physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual changes that the students are undergoing.
- While navigating these many challenges, school leaders must be unwavering in their commitment to an instructional leadership that demands high-quality teaching that includes developmentally appropriate content and pedagogy that are responsive to adolescent learner interests and needs.

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