

**Draft:**  
**Essential Components for Successful Middle Level  
Professional Learning Communities in Poudre School District**

**Key terms defined:**

Essential learnings	<p>What students should know, understand, and be able to do (content); how well students must do these things (performance); and which instructional techniques or recommended activities (curriculum) should be used to assist students in accomplishing the “what” and the “how”.</p> <p>Essential learnings are a curricular development plan that facilitates students’ understandings of the “big ideas,” key concepts, and principles of a discipline, as opposed to a collection of seemingly random and unrelated facts (Erickson, 1998)</p>
Skills for 21 <sup>st</sup> century	<p>Students will spend their adult lives in a multitasking, multifaceted, technology driven, diverse, vibrant world--and they must arrive equipped to do so.</p>
Relevant	<p>Having a bearing on or connection with the matter at hand, such as what is relevant for middle level learners, closely related to skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.</p>
Integrative	<p>Combining and coordinating diverse elements into a whole, such as integrating learning to allow middle level learners to make connections and meaning within one’s own experiences.</p> <p>The “structure of discipline” techniques teach students about the overarching structures underlying academic disciplines. They learn about the construction of knowledge within domains and learn how to follow developments within a field. This foundation helps students remember facts in a meaningful context.</p>
Exploratory	<p>Classes which allow middle level learners to spend variable amounts of time “exploring” encore elective classes in order to make educated choices for their course of study in subsequent years.</p>
Whole child	<p>Significant core and encore learning experiences for middle level learners characterized by rigorous content and high expectations for all learners.</p>
Transitions	<p>Achievement of a necessary balance between the security of the primary and intermediate-oriented teacher and school culture and the subject matter specialization of secondary teachers and school culture. The transition between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades and 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades at the middle level.</p>
Scope and sequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ guides grade level and whole school/district planning so that the same texts, topics and activities are not repeated year after year with the same student.</li><li>✓ makes links between the learning, strategies and texts used in different grades or stages.</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ assists the smooth transition of information about students' experiences and achievements between schools, grades or between classes.</li> <li>✓ sets a context which frames teacher's planning of their classes</li> <li>✓ guides efficient resourcing of rich and balanced programs.</li> <li>✓ provides contexts for monitoring, auditing and evaluating programs and resources.</li> <li>✓ is revisited to plan collaboratively</li> <li>✓ acts as a catalyst for district, school, department and/or individual professional development.</li> <li>✓ is available to parents and students to assist the setting of learning goals, negotiation of appropriate learning activities, and monitoring of breadth and balance in a school's program.</li> </ul>
Vertical and horizontal articulation	<p>The vertical (grade level) and horizontal (department level/subject level) alignment of curriculum into a systemic plan that allows teachers to deliver and students to learn the intended curriculum.</p> <p>The teams determine areas in which additional learning would be helpful and read articles, attend workshops or courses, or invite consultants to assist them in acquiring necessary knowledge or skills. In addition to the regular meetings, participants observe one another in the classroom and conduct other job related responsibilities. Learning communities are strengthened when other support staff, administrators, and even school board members choose to participate, and when communication is facilitated between teams. Because of this common focus and clear direction, problems of fragmentation and incoherence that typically thwart school improvement efforts are eliminated.</p>
Differentiated learning	<p>Learning that is accurately measured and specifically developed for each learning style and learner skill and proficiency.</p> <p>Curriculum modification is a procedure for removing repetitive, unnecessary, and unchallenging content, and/or enhancing existing curricular materials with higher level questioning, critical thinking components, independent thinking, transferring skills and insights into new contexts. Scaffolding is an approach which should be utilized to match the curriculum with the student's learning needs. Opportunities must also be provided for both guided and independent practice related to student learning activities and high expectations are maintained for all learning tasks.</p>
Active learning	<p>Learning that is engaging all learner intelligences, for example: hands on learning, experiential learning, etc. Enhancing existing curricular materials with higher level questioning, critical thinking components, independent thinking, transferring skills and insights into new contexts.</p>
Authentic assessments	<p>Assessment accomplished by using a variety of methods that do not merely measure students but become part of the learning process.</p>
Formative assessments	<p>Assessment that occurs consistently throughout a lesson and is used to gauge and guide instruction and learning. The point of assessment in education is to advance learning, not to merely audit absorption of facts.</p>
Summative assessments	<p>Assessment that occurs at the culmination of a lesson to check for learning, understanding and application. Often standardized and measured against benchmarks and standards.</p>
Common, collaborative	<p>Structured planning time for teachers to align curriculum across grades and school and to map efforts that address the academic, developmental, social and personal</p>

<p>planning</p>	<p>needs of students, especially at critical transition periods.</p> <p>The work of Rick DuFour, et. al, on “Professional Learning Communities,” states that “learning teams may be of various sizes and serve different purposes”. For instance, the faculty as a whole may meet once or twice a month to reflect on its work, engage in appropriate learning, and assess its progress. In addition, some members of the faculty may serve on school improvement teams or committees that focus on the goals and methods of school wide improvement. While these teams make important contributions to school culture, learning environment and other priority issues, they do not substitute for the day-to-day professional conversations focused on instructional issues that are the hallmark of effective learning communities. Learning teams meet almost every day and concern themselves with practical ways to improve teaching and learning. Members of learning communities take collective responsibility for the learning of all students represented by team members. Teacher members of learning teams, which consist of four to eight members, assist one another in examining the standards students are required to master, planning more effective lessons, critiquing student work, and solving the common problems of teaching and learning.</p>
<p>Multi-faceted guidance services</p>	<p>Addressing the needs of all students means addressing the needs of <b>each</b> student, specifically in the areas of social/emotional growth, career studies, support services, etc.</p>
<p>Systematic interventions</p>	<p>Addressing the needs of all learners by differentiated instruction/learning and allowing interventions to take place in a timely, necessary way. This would include extensions of learning, for example challenging the higher level learners as well as working with those who are not yet there. The professional learning community’s response to students who experience difficulty is:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Timely: the school quickly identifies students who need additional time and support or those who do not</li> <li>2. Based on intervention rather than remediation: the plan provides students with help as soon as they experience difficulty rather than relying on summer school, retention, and remedial courses; for those who do not experience difficulty then a more rigorous option is available</li> <li>3. Directive: instead of inviting students to receive additional help and support, the system plan requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered the necessary concepts. Those who demonstrate mastery early on, are accelerated immediately also.</li> </ol>

**Resources that influenced thought:**

Professional Learning Communities at Work (Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker)

This We Believe in Action: Implementing Successful Middle Level Schools (National Middle School Association)

Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform (National Association of Secondary School Principals)

Making Creative Schedules Work in Middle and High Schools (Elliot Y. Merenbloom and Barbara A. Kalina)

The Definitive Middle School Guide: A Handbook for Success (Imogene Forte and Sandra Schurr  
2007 National Middle School Conference, Houston Texas, National Middle School Association