



New England League  
of Middle Schools

# Hampden Wilbraham Regional School District Report Middle School Study

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## Hampden Wilbraham Regional School District Report

### **Introduction:**

In accordance with our agreement, site visits were conducted at the Thornton Burgess Middle School and the Wilbraham Middle School on Thursday, June 16, 2016. The driving question for this study as directed by Superintendent of Schools Marty O'Shea and his Leadership Team is: How do Middle Schools compare to NELMS Spotlight Schools with regard to programs and middle level best practices.

Prior to the visit we:

- Reviewed the process and essential questions to be addressed on the visits;
- Noted any areas the principals or superintendent would like to have specifically reviewed;
- Identified key contacts at the schools;
- Established a schedule of activities/interviews with school personnel;
- Held two conference calls to convey information and discuss expectations.

The review of materials, as well as on-site visits to Wilbraham Middle School and Thornton Burgess Middle School were completed on June 16, 2016. In the conduct of the review, we examined the following documents:

- Community Surveys and results
- Handbook for Students and Families
- Middle School Task Force Report
- Middle School Unification Brochure
- Teacher Schedules
- Master Schedule

Administrators in both schools were accommodating and welcoming, and students and staff were as well. Both schools employ a secured entry process, and the main areas of each are student centered and welcoming to community members. Interviews during the two day visit were conducted with school administrators, Middle School Task Force members, teachers, parents, community members, and students.

## Thornton Burgess Middle School

Eight students were interviewed at TBMS. Students described their teachers as “caring” “helpful” “having great attitudes” and that they “know every kid”. Students state that from an instructional standpoint, they receive the help that they need, teachers stay after school to help and seem willing to do “whatever it takes”. Teachers do pre and post testing in most classes according to these students. They express that some teachers allow test retakes, while others do not. They express some frustration on “slow technology some days”. They like the idea of looping to have the same teachers for a couple of years because the teachers get to know them, but also express that when teachers have to teach multiple grade levels “it affects the teacher”. Students feel safe in this school.

While there appears to be evidence of some performance based assessment, the majority of assessment is paper and pencil with some multiple choice and open ended questions. Student advisory is held daily at the start of the day, and the time is used to take attendance, lunch count, play some teambuilding games as time allows, and discuss upcoming school events and activities.

Students are engaged in developing school rules and culture through their participation in the “Constitutional Convention” at the beginning of the year, where all advisories contribute three or four key words that are then crafted by a group of student leaders to serve as the “Social Contract” for the school. This contract is posted throughout the school, and students are well aware of those expectations.

Students are excited about the weekly drawings of names of students who have been submitted as doing something special, “Awesome Student” of the month, and are rewarded with some small token of recognition, typically some form of gift certificate.

When asked if there was anything they would like to have changed in the school, they responded: “longer lunch and recess”; “speed up the technology and have newer devices so that more can be used more often”; “we need more choices for specials and more time so they are not so big”; and “we need more sports after school, but we don’t have many kids, so we may not be very good”.

Thirteen teachers were interviewed at TBMS. Teachers describe the school as a “great place to work”, with colleagues who are committed to supporting each other, and meeting the needs of all kids. Teachers state that they want to be here and are willing to do “whatever it takes” to meet the needs of the whole child. They feel that the stability in staff lends to a feeling of family and belonging for the students.

Through the advisory system, teachers work on goal setting with students at the beginning of the year; revisit them in the middle, and at the end.

Parent communication is conducted largely through email, Edline, and the “Tuesday Envelope”, a gathering of materials about assignments, events and notices.

Teachers report that due to budget restrictions, the unified arts program has been affected by less instructional time for students, fewer choices and teachers teaching outside of their areas of certification. In addition, when changes need to be made due to student conflict or other barriers to student success, the options are either limited or non-existent.

Teachers expressed that the staff believes in the whole child approach and middle school philosophy, but with some teachers teaching across grade levels, and multiple subjects, team planning time is essentially non-existent, and they are feeling that they will over time, lose that quality that they have prided themselves in. They also explain that the loss of this team planning has impacted creativity in lesson planning and therefore impacts the depth of the students learning experience. Teachers state that team planning time is essential in providing consistency and strong support systems that engage every child at this critical stage of development. In addition, they also state that the smallness of the school allows them to develop good relationships with students.

### **Wilbraham Middle School:**

At WMS six students were interviewed. When asked what they love about this school, they said their teachers “cared”, “were personable”, and “helpful.” They feel that the school is a safe place to be, it is a caring environment and “people are not mean here”.

Most teachers do pre and post testing in classes according to these students. They express that some teachers allow test retakes, while others do not. They also express some frustration of “slow technology some days”.

Students are engaged in developing school rules and culture through their participation in the “Constitutional Convention” at the beginning of the year, as at TBMS, where all advisories contribute three or four key words that are then crafted by a group of student leaders to serve as the “Social Contract” for the school. This contract is posted throughout the school, and students are well aware of those expectations.

This group of primarily 8<sup>th</sup> graders explained that in advisory they have a “red folder” that they work on, and this folder is a career exploration opportunity. Another part of this program is the videos that accompany it, and the Junior Achievement Day that features career speakers. They found that interesting.

When asked if there was anything they would like changed at the school, one student mentioned “the colors”, while another described the building as “tired”, needing air conditioning in all of the rooms, and updating the aging technology and slow internet access. Students also stated that textbooks were “old and outdated” and they “needed new books.” Students also noted a perception that the “Red Group” had “smarter math kids” together for algebra, while the other two teams had the pre-algebra students. Student agenda books were cited as helpful and valuable for organizing and communicating.

Thirteen teachers at WMS were interviewed. When asked what they love about working here, responses included: “We have hard working, dedicated teachers who make it a special place for kids” and “there are awesome kids here.”

Teachers expressed frustration over the elimination of team planning time for next year, citing that they felt that addressing the needs of the whole child was being lost, particularly the children “in the middle of the pack”. They feel that children will “fall through the cracks” due to the lack of opportunity to coordinate projects, collaborate on planning, and apply consistently high expectations. Cross curricular instruction, which enriches and deepens the child’s learning experience, is being lost in this process. Furthermore, cross-grade level teaching impacts the ability of team planning do to scheduling conflicts of teacher availability.

Teachers report that continuous budget restrictions have resulted in them purchasing more materials and supplies from their own pockets, outdated technology, slow infrastructure, inequitable teaching loads, not all students having the access to all programs (Sci-Tech), the elimination of exploratory programs and outdated textbooks.

In addition, teachers expressed that in the absence of tiered intervention models, consistent curriculum documents and pacing guides across grade levels and schools, and little time to

collaborate within the building and with colleagues at TBMS, students will have inequitable learning experiences. Further frustrating them is the volume of data they have available to them, with little or no time to analyze that data and apply the results to instructional practices. With regards to Professional Development needs, teachers cite the lack of funds to support further training in middle level best practices, RTI, and Technology training that is needed and wanted by the staff.

Teachers also express concern that the Professional Learning Communities lack structure, trained facilitators and collaboration efforts have diminished over time.

Teachers express a deep commitment to the age group of students who they are working with, and voice their concerns that children will be the unintended consequence of the continuing financial constraints.

### **Both Schools/District**

The Parent Handbook is a comprehensive document that presents the mission, policies, academic and behavioral expectations, as well as daily logistics.

Teachers report little or no time is dedicated to coordinating or aligning, curriculum between the two middle schools.

Both schools possess various components of effective middle level practices, but these practices are inconsistently applied.

### **Driving question for this study:**

**“How do these schools compare to NELMS Spotlight Schools with regards to programs and Middle Level Best Practices?”**

The following is a compilation of the characteristics that have resulted in schools being recognized as NELMS Spotlight Schools over the past several years. No one school necessarily possesses all of these traits, but these are the “Flagship” characteristics of each school as determined by their self-study and confirmed by the NELMS Spotlight School Committee. Each grouping lists the practices in place for a particular school.

Effective Interdisciplinary Teams  
Flexible Scheduling  
Flexible and appropriate grouping practices