

Success in the Middle Necessary to Success Overall



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In recent weeks, Illinois Senator Barack Obama and Arizona Representative Raúl Grijalva introduced the Success in the Middle Act. In its current form, it is a bill that our two associations proudly support. It is also a bill that is necessary and long overdue. Success in the Middle would authorize \$1 billion for states receiving grant funds to implement plans for improving student achievement in the middle grades. States and districts would have to find a way to more quickly identify students most at risk of dropping out, and then take steps to help those students succeed.

At its core, the bill is very sound. It calls for states and districts to diligently work towards establishing proven intervention strategies and implementing systems that improve student learning in the middle grades. Who wouldn't want to see any of those things happen? The more pressing question is: Will Congress do what is necessary to help make them happen?

As the nation draws nearer to the 2014 deadline for 100 percent proficiency on state assessments called for in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more formally known as No Child Left Behind, there aren't many among us who don't realize the odds we're facing. The results of an NASSP/Phi Delta Kappa poll (*A Voice From the Middle*, 2007) of the nation's middle-level students revealed that nearly 9 in 10 students in grades 7 and 8 say they feel prepared to succeed in high school. This is in stark contrast to what actually happens once they arrive. Year after year we read that anywhere from 500,000 to one million students are dropping out of high school—most of them between grades 9 and 10. Where does the disconnect occur? It occurs before the student even arrives at the doors of their new high school.

We can no longer ignore the fact that for many students, the awkward transition from elementary to the middle grades signals the diminishment of any possibility for a bright future. Nearly 15 million of the students who are tested annually in this country are in grades 5 through 8, representing almost 60 percent of the total school population. Yet, nationally middle schools get a mere drop of the federal funding and support needed for administrators and teachers to truly effect change.

Education reform at the middle level is more important now than ever before, and it is imperative that Congress pass the Success in the Middle Act. The global landscape is changing every minute and if we want to ensure that the future citizens of this nation can live decent and dignified lives, we must work to give every student a quality education. The problem isn't simply being able to compete with China or India or any other growing nation. It is about the need for respect and relevance in a rapidly changing world. Technology is advancing by leaps and bounds. Even auto mechanics have to be extremely computer literate in order to effectively do their jobs.

Statistics show that most students who drop out do so between grades 9 and 10. Therefore, it can rightly be assumed that most of these students were ill-equipped to succeed before they ever even thought about dropping out of school. These students can't imagine how challenging the road ahead will be for them, but we educators know the difficulties they will face as a result of this life-altering decision. We recognize the support students need in transitioning successfully from elementary school to their middle years and we must ensure that they remain in school and are successful through grade 12 and beyond. It's imperative that all who have a stake in student success make Congress aware of those supports as well.