



Portland Public Schools

Middle Grades Redesign Plan

Spring 2023-2026

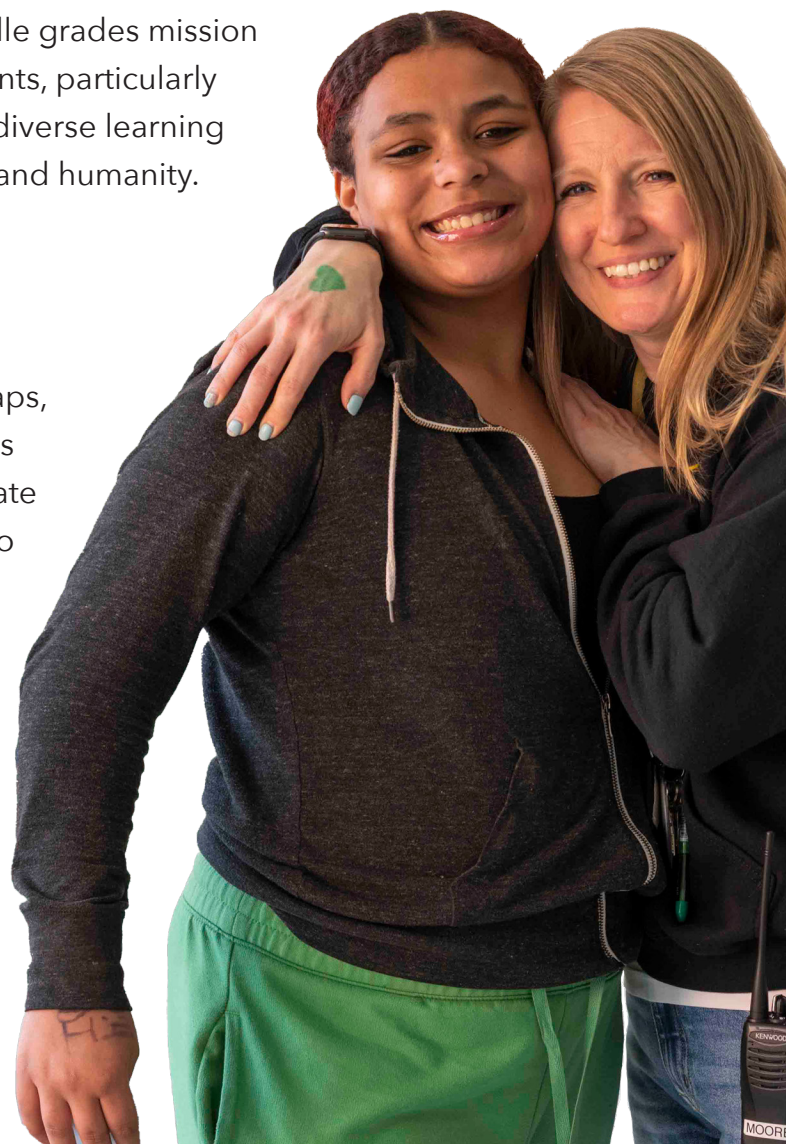


Mission

In service to students, Portland Public Schools' middle grades mission is to engage, elevate, and empower all of our students, particularly those with the highest needs through relevant and diverse learning experiences connecting to and affirming their lives and humanity.

Vision

To close persistent achievement and opportunity gaps, Portland Public Schools will ensure all middle grades educators are provided the opportunity to collaborate within teaming structures. We will enable students to actively demonstrate ownership of their learning and to access engaging, high quality instruction meaningful to their everyday lives, and prioritize fostering healthy interpersonal relationships and social-emotional learning.



Guiding Values

Responsiveness

All decisions about middle grades are grounded in and approached through a student-centered, trauma-informed lens, leveraging the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents.

Challenge

Building off the components of the instructional framework, middle grades cultivate high expectations and advance learning for every member of the school community, promoting inquiry, exploration, critical thinking, and relevance for our students.

Empowerment

The middle grades experience facilitates environments in which students take responsibility for their own learning and contribute positively to the world around them, making connections between what's happening in their classroom and their communities.

Engagement

The middle grades experience fosters a learning atmosphere that is relevant, inclusive, participatory, and motivating for all learners.

Equity

By checking implicit and explicit bias, the middle grades experience provides socially just learning opportunities and environments for every student.





Introduction

Middle school is a significant time for young people, but the pandemic both exacerbated typical challenges and introduced new obstacles. Now more than ever, it is critical that we establish systems so that our middle-grades students meet their varied needs, thrive during these tumultuous years, and advance to the next stage of their education.

Recognizing this, our 2021-2025 strategic plan calls for Portland Public Schools to redesign the middle school experience. In partnership with the Association for Middle Level Education, this multi-year redesign has pulled together people from across the district to comb research about adolescent learners.

On top of this research, we layered the voices of our students, families, educators, and school leaders. We aimed to celebrate successes in our middle schools while also taking a critical look at improving our students' experiences during these dynamic transitional years.

We started broad and narrowed. First, we identified eighteen fundamental initiatives. Collectively, they represent elements of a high-quality, redesigned middle-grades experience. We next broke these out into work happening districtwide that could be specialized to middle grades, work that should happen simultaneously across all middle-grades schools, and work that could be phased in over the next three years with variations between schools. This plan was built to be flexible for different school communities, to build on current work, and to scale over the next three school years.

These initiatives collectively respond to adolescents' distinctive needs at this moment in time. Our middle-grades students will be challenged and engaged, with high expectations and relevant experiences that foster curiosity, exploration, participation, and critical thinking. Redesigned middle-grades learning environments will empower students to take responsibility and, in keeping with our district's core values, doggedly pursue equity.

Planning Timeline

Laying The Foundation for Success

June 2019

Portland Public Schools presents a bold, community-driven vision: reimagine PPS. That includes a graduate portrait, essential qualities for our educators, and system shifts we need to be successful.

May 2021

Portland Public Schools adopts an aligned strategic plan to bring that vision to life. That plan identifies middle school redesign as a key step to self-directed, future-ready learning.

Oct 2022

Over seventy educators, community partners, and school and district leaders begin developing the Middle Grades Redesign Plan.

Nov 2022

Fourteen Portland Public Schools leaders attend the Association for Middle Level Education Annual Conference.

Jan 2023

Portland Public Schools educators and staff complete The Successful Middle School Assessment.

**Jan - Feb
2023**

Our Successful Schedule team convenes four times with Dr. Ann McCarty Perez, author of The Successful Middle School Schedule, to consider how scheduling can support middle grades redesign.

April 2023

K-8 and 6-8 principals gather with Dr. Ann McCarty Perez to consider specific shell schedules that create space for advisory programs and increased access to electives.

**April -June
2023**

Our Transformative Social and Emotional Learning department finishes a multi-year process to adopt two possible social-emotional learning curricula. Middle-grades principals begin selecting which curricula to use during advisory programs.

May 2023

Middle-grades students and families complete The Successful Middle School Assessment.

Planning Timeline

Laying The Foundation for Success

**Summer
2023**

The Successful Middle School Assessment results are shared with schools to inform next steps of their school's redesign.

June 2023

Portland Public Schools sends over forty leaders to the Association for Middle Level Education's leadership institute to further strengthen their knowledge of adolescent learners heading into the 2023-2024 school year.

Aug 2023

Middle grades educators begin receiving professional learning opportunities in the new social-emotional learning curriculum.

Aug 2023

Middle grades schools begin implementing school-chosen initiatives.



The Themes

The Middle Grades Redesign Plan has been written to align with the district's strategic plan.

Our committees began with the strategic plan's four themes:

Inclusive and Differentiated Teaching and Learning

Creating learning environments where all grade-level content is engaging, affirming and meaningful.

Embracing Change

Ensuring our systems allow students to move into the world of tomorrow and do not trap them in the world of today.

Racial Equity and Social Justice

Elevating Black and Native students and families by creating safe, inclusive environments that leverage cultural strengths, and ensure that students see themselves represented.



Professional Excellence and Support

Developing a culture of care and belonging amongst and between teachers, administrators, and central office, leading to a trusting workplace where everyone feels listened to and valued.

In considering their own lived experiences, their roles within the district, and the distinct needs of middle-grades students, our committees felt the plan needed a fifth theme specific to middle grades redesign:

Integrated Adolescent Supports

Providing schoolwide programs and systems that foster a sense of belonging, community, and social-emotional well-being for students, staff, and families.

These five themes provided structure as our team brainstormed specific initiatives to redesign the middle grades experience for our students.



The Initiatives

Within the five identified themes, we identified a total of eighteen initiatives intended to shift systems for our middle-grades learners. These were based on:

- current research
- best practices from other institutions
- guidance from Association for Middle Level Education
- survey feedback
- professional expertise from the Office of School Performance, the Office of Teaching and Learning, and the Office of Student Support Services.

Our goal was to start broad and identify a wide array of initiatives that could shift outcomes for middle-grades students in Portland Public Schools.

Theme: Integrated Adolescent Supports

Initiative #1:
Provide all middle grades students with access to advisory programs

Advisory programs create time for teachers to thoughtfully and intentionally foster a sense of belonging, community, and social-emotional well-being for students, staff and families. Advisory programs exist in approximately two-thirds of our middle grades presently, but these programs will become available for all middle grades students during the 2023-2024 school year. The programs will utilize social-emotional learning curricula.

Initiative #2:
Expand extracurricular opportunities

Extracurricular activities are critical to adolescent development. Based on student interest, learning needs, school capacity, and community partnerships, we will increase access to a wide variety of extracurricular activities. This includes expanding summer academic and enrichment experiences.

Initiative #3:
Provide opportunities to develop college and career readiness

Middle grades students are years away from ending their PPS journey, but they should begin thinking about the post-secondary possibilities available to them. We will implement career and college readiness at each middle grade level, and AVID at each school. Students will complete at least two activities in CIS Jr. at each grade level, and eighth graders will reflect on those activities as part of refining their Education Plan and Profile.

**Initiative #4:
Provide comprehensive
social-emotional and mental
health services**

Adolescent social-emotional and mental health have received significant attention in research, and it was top of the mind during our redesign conversations. To meet growing needs, we will provide all middle grades students with core counseling services, and curricula covering social-emotional learning and mental health literacy. Each K-8 and middle school will also have a School Climate Specialist beginning in the 2022-2023 school year.

Theme: Inclusive and Differentiated Teaching and Learning

**Initiative #5:
Implement engaging,
grade-level, and standards-
aligned curriculum, and
responsive classroom
instructional practices**

Across all grades, we're adopting high-quality learning materials that are aligned with state standards and best practices. As we implement these, we need to be responsive to the varied needs of middle-grades students – especially their social-emotional needs. We will train instructional staff to use our multi-tiered systems of support and create responsive classrooms.

**Initiative #6:
Implement project-based
learning**

During adolescence, students strengthen their capacity to assess themselves and benefit from hands-on learning opportunities. We will therefore develop more courses with project-based learning options, including connections to high school career and technical education. These courses will include culturally-relevant examples of how students can demonstrate their skills and knowledge. This shift will culminate with a new districtwide requirement for eighth graders: a capstone

**Initiative #7:
Implement equitable
grading and assessment**

Equitable grading and assessment recognize that mistakes are part of the learning process, and shifts from emphasizing those to more summative assessment. Inspired and guided by Joe Feldman's Grading for Equity, we will shift grading and assessment practices across middle grades. Examples include shifting from grading incompletes and missing assignments as zeros, and bolstering our use of mathematically-sound calculations and scales. These shifts will include professional learning opportunities, both content-specific and general.

Theme: Embracing Change

Initiative #8: Foster effective transitions to middle school

We recognize that the transition from fifth to sixth grade is significant, especially when a student shifts from an elementary school to a comprehensive middle school. We will utilize eighth graders to welcome sixth graders and foster a sense of belonging. As with Connect to Kindergarten, we will ensure families feel a heightened sense of engagement with their students' middle schools and are thoroughly informed about deadlines, resources, and opportunities.

Initiative #9: Continuously improve

Through our district's strategic plan, each school has already created a continuous improvement plan, complete with metrics to monitor progress. Into those plans, we will integrate feedback and learning from the Association of Middle Level Education. This partnership will ensure each school's plan accounts for the specific needs of adolescent learners.

Initiative #10: Craft Innovative Schedules

In shifting to middle school, students' schedules become more complicated than in elementary school. For the first time, they must get themselves and their supplies around a building, shifting subjects as they move spaces. Schedules changes are, Dr. Ann McCarty Perez writes, "one of the most useful and impactful tools that a leader can use to address student needs, implement new initiatives (see page 10), and drive process." We will craft new, creative schedules that make equitable space and time for this plan's initiatives.

Initiative #11: Standardize eighth grade field trips and capstones

As we implement project-based learning, we will build toward two culminating experiences. An eighth grade trip will use place-based learning to engage community and environment, and offer our students an opportunity to reflect as they prepare to transition to high school. Eighth grade capstones will also afford an opportunity for students to reflect with particular attention to their academic progress.

Theme: Racial Equity and Social Justice

Initiative #12: Invest resources with culturally specific and multi-racial organizations

Portland Public Schools provides significant investment in racial equity and social justice through both culturally specific partnerships and the SUN system. We identified a district need to broaden partnerships in middle schools and extend racial equity and social justice strategies to all middle and K-8 schools.

Initiative #13: Fully implement a Restorative Justice framework

Our redesign team felt strongly that increasing conflicts in school require robust restorative justice systems. These will already be implemented across the district, but we invite specific, prompt middle grades implementation, including collecting baseline data, providing professional learning, and expanding staffing and programming. To support this, each K-8 and middle school will have a Restorative Justice Coordinator during the 2023-2024 school year.

Initiative #14: Create meaningful opportunities for same race mentoring and leadership

Research has shown, again and again, the power of mentorship. Our team also recognized that, if students are to embody our graduate portrait by the end of high school, we must do a better job nurturing their leadership in middle school. We can do this by expanding access to same-race mentors, and by elevating BIPOC student voices in school and district decision making, and in adult professional learning.

Initiative #15: Create culturally affirming opportunities through affinity groups

Our team recognized that middle school is a time when all students struggle with belonging – but especially BIPOC students. We have seen an increase in hate-based incidents across middle schools, and these must be addressed with fidelity and consistency. A strong affinity group framework can address both challenges. Staff and families should also be trained on how to encourage positive cultural identity.

Theme: Professional Excellence and Support

Initiative #16: Provide educators with consistent opportunities for planning and collaboration

As middle-grade students move between learning spaces, and interact with multiple educators, there is significant potential for needs to go unmet. The solution is clear: dedicate time for communication, collaboration, and coordination. We will do this alongside a systemwide shift to school-based professional learning. With middle grades educators, we will dedicate particular attention to adult learning theory.

Initiative #17: Provide targeted professional learning and support

As schools shift to site-based professional learning, we will integrate context about adolescent learners and middle-grades education, and best practices from the Association of Middle Level Education. Designated Lead Teachers from the middle grades will support math, English language arts, social studies, and science.

Initiative #18: Implement interdisciplinary eighth grade success teams

The research is unequivocal: when “adults and students share many common experiences during the daily tasks of the school day,” educators can align strategies to ensure success. We will pilot and launch interdisciplinary teams to ensure our eighth graders succeed. Those teams will meet regularly, strategize about how to transition students to ninth grade, and review key qualitative and quantitative data (academic performance, high school readiness, student and family feedback, etc.).

The Plan: 2023–2026

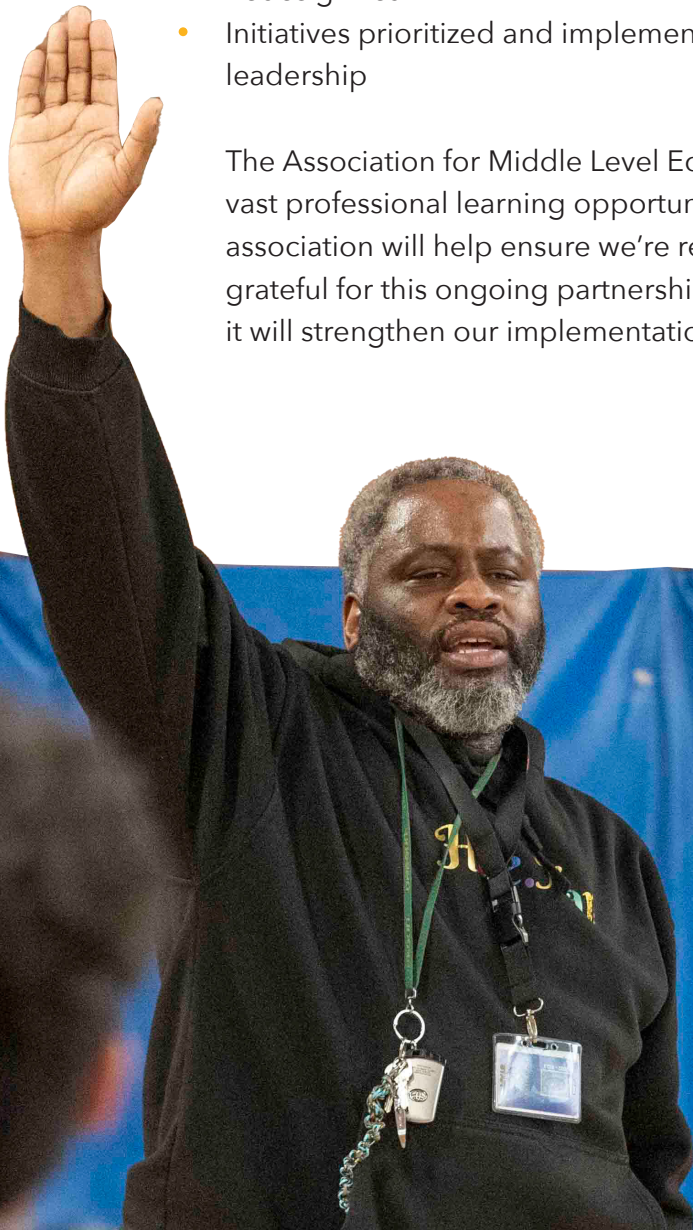
These eighteen initiatives represent elements of a high-quality, redesigned middle-grades experience. All eighteen are necessary, and they all work together and are mutually reinforcing.

Getting to scale, though, requires that these initiatives are implemented with consistency and fidelity across schools, and that we do not overload our middle-grades educators and leaders. We want to provide flexibility for different school communities to make changes in a sequence that works best for them. We also want to provide central support for critical work happening simultaneously across all schools.

The Middle School Redesign Plan therefore breaks down over three school years, and into three categories:

- Initiatives implemented across K-12 but specialized by the Middle Grades Redesign Team
- Initiatives implemented across all schools simultaneously, guided by the Middle Grades Redesign Team
- Initiatives prioritized and implemented on a year-to-year basis by principals and site-level leadership

The Association for Middle Level Education will be a key partner in this work. Given their vast professional learning opportunities, and talented and knowledgeable staff, the association will help ensure we're remaining focused and utilizing best practices. We are grateful for this ongoing partnership and believe it will strengthen our implementation.



The Plan: 2023–2026

Specializing districtwide initiatives for middle grades learners

Portland Public Schools is transforming existing systems to ensure each student gets a high-quality teaching and learning experience throughout their K-12 years. That includes a new instructional framework and new curricula that are rigorous and standards-based across our schools. We've grown our multi-tiered systems of support, hired new learning support staff, and made significant investments in racial equity and social justice. As we redesign the middle grades experience, we need to specialize these eight initiatives for adolescent learners:

Initiative #4: Provide comprehensive social-emotional and mental health services

Initiative #5: Implement engaging, grade-level, and standards-aligned curriculum, and responsive classroom instructional practices

Initiative #9: Continuously improve

Initiative #12: Invest resources with culturally specific and multi-racial organizations

Initiative #14: Create meaningful opportunities for same race mentoring and leadership

Initiative #15: Create culturally affirming opportunities through affinity groups

Initiative #16: Provide educators with consistent opportunities for planning and collaboration

Initiative #17: Provide targeted professional learning and support

Key simultaneous initiatives

A cornerstone of the redesign process must be consistency across schools. We have therefore identified five initiatives which we believe must be implemented simultaneously and with fidelity across all schools. The Middle Grades Redesign Team will drive implementation of these initiatives and provide centralized support.

Initiative #1: Provide all middle grades students with access to advisory programs

Initiative #10: Craft Innovative Schedules

Initiative #11: Standardize eighth grade field trips and capstones

Initiative #13: Fully implement a Restorative Justice framework

Initiative #18: Implement interdisciplinary eighth grade success teams

The Plan: 2023–2026

Year-to-year initiatives prioritized by principals and site-level leadership

In June 2023, middle grades principals will receive their school-specific survey results from the Association for Middle Level Education assessment. Principals will be asked to take this information and engage with their site-level leadership to create an initiative roadmap for the next three school years. In partnership with the Middle Grades Redesign team, leaders will identify work that needs the most urgent support from among the following initiatives:

Initiative #2: Expand extracurricular opportunities

Initiative #3: Provide opportunities to develop college and career readiness

Initiative #6: Implement project-based learning

Initiative #7: Implement equitable grading and assessment

Initiative #8: Foster effective transitions to middle school

The Middle Grades Redesign Initiative team will track which initiatives are underway at each school.



Initiatives in Early Development: Laying Foundations for Redesign

Innovative schedules with advisory programs and expanded extracurricular opportunities (Initiatives 1, 2, and 10)

During the 2022-2023 school year, this project team formed to deeply review innovative schedule options. Working with Dr. Ann McCarty Perez, author of *The Successful Middle School Schedule*, the team developed guiding principles:

- Students need different things at different times
- All middle grades students need access to a variety of electives and enrichments
- All students will succeed given the right academic and social-emotional support
- All middle schoolers deserve to be supported and challenged
- Each school community knows the needs of their students and can augment that knowledge with research-informed best practices
- What we build as our legacy matters
- Relationships are essential
- All middle grades students deserve to have voice and choice in their learning



Initiatives in Early Development: Laying Foundations for Redesign

Within these parameters, the team worked with Dr. McCarty Perez to develop three possible shells of schedules for middle schools to use during the 2023-2024 school year. All three options advance two other initiatives: each dedicates time for advisory programming, and each provides the opportunity for more electives with block or wheel schedules.

Option 1: Six periods	Option 2: Seven periods	Option 3: Hybrid
Periods students receive instruction		School teams will choose any of the traditional and block schedules, and combine them either by alternating or rotating days. This type allows at least one block period a week for longer periods of instruction, but also traditional periods where educators see students every period.
Six	Seven	
Periods educators teach		
Five	Five	
Non-instruction period for Student Success		
One	Two	
Elective Opportunities		
Two periods and the opportunity for clubs built into an end-of-day schedule	Three periods and the opportunities for clubs built into an end-of-day schedule	Two or three periods and opportunities for clubs built into an end-of-day schedule

Site leaders decide how to meet the specific needs of their school communities. With a flexible period, school leaders may, for example, provide time for clubs and enrichments to ensure students have equitable access to elective programming. During the fall and winter of 2023-2024, a project team will come together again to review the most promising practices and build on these strengths for the following school year.

Initiatives in Early Development: Laying Foundations for Redesign

Targeted professional learning to support new curricula (Initiatives 5 and 17)

During the 2022-2023 school-year, middle-grades math educators began using a new standards-aligned curriculum for sixth through eighth grades. Beginning in February 2023, a team formed to ensure continuity in how math is taught across all grades, and to ensure we were properly aligning and sequencing concepts. A core goal was to create pathways that result in equitable learning outcomes throughout the district.

As part of that work, Dr. Farshid Safi will lead a two-day summit in August 2023 for middle-grades math educators. Dr. Safi's research focuses on developing students and teachers' understanding of mathematics in coherent, conceptual, and connected ways with an emphasis on relevance and de-siloing mathematical experiences. In our shared work, Dr. Safi will coach our educators to "help [students] see the mathematical expertise that resides in themselves, their classmates, their families, and their communities."

Implementing advisory programs in all middle grades

Throughout the fall and winter of 2022-2023 advisory programming emerged as a key initiative that should include social-emotional learning, school counseling, and college and career readiness. Research also suggested these programs would be more successful if they were culturally and linguistically specific.

Portland Public Schools has spent two years adopting two social-emotional curricula that are aligned with a variety of districtwide initiatives: racial equity and social justice, new instructional framework, and instructional coaching, among others. These two options foster belonging and community, and include home connections. Our team believes these new curricula should be the cornerstone of middle-grades advisory programs.

Currently, at the end of the 2022-2023 school year, approximately two-thirds of our middle grades schools offer some type of advisory programs, so our goals are to make these universal and consistent. During the 2023-2024 school year, schools that have an existing advisory program may continue with that program by adding required supplemental advisory lessons from the counseling and health departments. Schools that do not have an existing advisory program will select from one of the two district-adopted social-emotional curricula to use. District-provided support for implementation and timeline for school selection are detailed below.

Initiatives in Early Development: Laying Foundations for Redesign

Providing comprehensive social-emotional and mental health services

In March 2022, PPS announced a long-term partnership with the University of Oregon's Ballmer Institute. Researchers at the institute will work with PPS behavioral health professionals to deliver mental and behavioral health services to our students. Undergraduates pursuing their degree will be required to deliver services in schools, health care systems, and the community. This has never been done in the United States, but evidence from other countries indicates that it will effectively increase students' access to care.

The institute will open its doors in Fall 2023, and five middle-grades schools will be key early partners during the 2023-2024 school year:

- George Middle School
- Harriet Tubman Middle School
- Kellogg Middle School
- Lane Middle School
- Ockley Green Middle School

In these schools, undergraduates studying to be Child Behavioral Health Specialists will help identify students in need of support earlier and with more regularity. They will spend 16-20 hours each week at their assigned site, helping to conduct behavioral health needs assessments and to establish services.



Key Definitions

Advisory programs

Dedicated time for educators to thoughtfully and intentionally foster a sense of belonging, community and social emotional well-being for students, staff, and families.

Adolescent Learner

Students between ten and fourteen years old, and generally between fifth and eighth grades.

Eighth Grade Capstone

Purpose-based learning opportunity, culmination of students' academic learning that will provide students the opportunity to demonstrate their growth and skills related to the PPS Graduate Portrait to be Inquisitive critical thinkers with deep core knowledge; Powerful and effective communicators; Inclusive and Collaborative Problem Solvers; Positive, confident and connected sense of self; Resilient and adaptable lifelong learners.

Eighth Grade Success Teams

One group of teachers across core content areas who share students using student data and protocols that will focus shifts in teacher practice that will center the growth, development, learning and well-being of students in the 8th Grade

Equitable Grading

Equitable grading practices aim for grades that are accurate, bias-resistant, and intrinsically motivating. Grades must accurately reflect only a student's academic level of performance, exclude nonacademic criteria (such as behavior), and use mathematically-sound calculations and scales.

Effective Transitions

As students move between fifth and sixth grade, and from eighth to ninth grade, they will be supported by a variety of systems with the expectation that they will arrive in their new grade ready to learn, socialize, and thrive.

Project Based Learning

Project-based learning is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects.

Portland Public Middle-Grades Schools

Comprehensive Middle Schools

Beaumont
daVinci
George
Harriet Tubman
Harrison Park
Hosford
Jackson
Kellogg
Lane
Mt. Tabor
Ockley Green
Robert Gray
Roseway Heights
Sellwood
West Sylvan

K-8th Grade Schools

Access Academy
Astor
Beverly Cleary
Cesar Chavez
Creative Science
Faubion
Laurelhurst
Metropolitan Learning Center
Odyssey
Skyline
Sunnyside
Vernon
Winterhaven

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Planning Teams

This project benefited immensely from many people from across Portland Public Schools. Students, families, educators, and school leaders all shared their experiences, knowledge, and suggestions with our Middle Grades Redesign team. This mix of perspectives was critical to informing this plan's themes, initiatives, and workplan.

We want to express our gratitude to the team members below and to others not listed who shared their knowledge, expertise, and feedback.

Project Core Team: Anjene Bryant, Christyn McCloskey, Joanna Tobin, and Education Elements

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Priority Area Design Teams: Members of the Steering Committee + Advisory Team; Dr. Armstrong and additional members as appropriate