



Lagging middle schools targeted

New plans to boost student achievement to roll out this summer

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Tuesday's Online Poll

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Alarmed by slumping student achievement at Los Angeles Unified middle schools, district officials are moving this summer to roll out several programs designed to improve performance amid criticism that middle-schoolers have been overlooked for too long.

Statewide test results last week showed just five out of 98 LAUSD middle schools - about 5 percent - are meeting California's academic standards, a much smaller percentage than the district's elementary and high schools.

On average, LAUSD middle-school students scored 634 on the state test, compared with the statewide goal of 800 and the statewide middle school average of 720.

But district officials said several plans have been developed to boost achievement, two of which are expected to roll out this summer.

"We can't ignore the data ... this has to be our target next year," said Ray Cortines, senior deputy superintendent for LAUSD.

"It is also important that we look at the bright spots. In recent testing, writing scores went up the most at the middle school level ... We need to look further and build on that success."

Cortines said the district is considering several programs for middle schools and this summer at least 17 high-priority schools are expected to launch "personalized learning environments" that would group students by age or grade to create more tight-knit campus communities.

At least five middle schools will adopt an eight-period schedule this fall in which they will rotate four periods every day to increase the time each student spends with a teacher.

Some schools, including the new one being built in Porter Ranch, also will keep students on the same campus from kindergarten through eighth grade. Called "span schools," they are proposed as a possible alternative to the traditional middle-school model.

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Still, many middle-school administrators and teachers have become frustrated with the district's neglect.

"We are like the kids caught in the middle," said Sandra Cruz, principal at Van Nuys Middle School.

Van Nuys Middle School suffered a four-point dip in this year's Academic Performance Index test scores, which Cruz said reflects the lack of services for her students.

"There is a break in the support system for kids in middle school and this is the time to ensure that they have achieved their standards ... It's a pivotal point that can make them successful because it's a transition stage and it has been ignored," she said.

While Millikan Middle School is one of the schools that met the state's API test score goals, Assistant Principal Leah Bass-Baylis said it still struggles to maintain programs amid a budget squeeze.

"I think the district needs to step it up for middle schools," Bass-Baylis said. "Even for a high-performing school like us, it is hard to do the programs without the funds."

Jeanie Leighton, director of middle school programs, said part of the problem has been the emphasis given to elementary and high school intervention programs.

"Every time we have moved towards middle school reform, something else has come up ... As

a district, we have not done enough," she said.

And the neglect in the crucial middle-school years can cause long-term problems.

Bill Plitkin, director of research for the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, said his group will release a study this week on the need for resources at the middle-school level.

"Middle school is critical and it has largely been neglected," said Plitkin. "With demand for high school graduation increasing, as well as requirements to get into college, middle school is where kids need to be prepared - academically, socially and developmentally."

Irv Howard, director of California's Department of Education program for middle-school reform, also said it is important for school districts to make middle schools a priority.

"Let's admit it, we screwed it up," Howard said. "We addressed the issues of pre-K and elementary, skipped middle all together and moved on to high school."

"Well, in order get them from elementary to high school they need to go through middle school - and if no one is dealing with them and giving them the tools they need, why would you begin to think they are going to make it through high school?"

Cortines said he plans to meet with middle-school principals and teachers to figure out what services need to be provided.

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He also said he wants to look beyond the classroom to engage the community, students and parents.

Howard's only recommendation to the district: "Forget the gimmicks."

"We have some really good models out there, so cut through the garbage and get down to what can make these schools work."