



Question: What do AISD parents, employees, students and community members think about how well students are prepared for the transitions to middle and high school? What do they think are the most important issues that should be addressed in a Middle School Education Plan? Where do the results of this survey overlap with the Key Challenges and Strategic Response Identified in the 2007 Middle School Level Report?

Response: As part of its planning process for the development of a Middle School Education Plan, the office of the Associate Superintendent for Middle Schools posted links to online surveys on both the Spanish and English versions of the AISD website from December 7th, 2007 to January 11th, 2008. The survey contained questions about how well AISD students are prepared for the transitions from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school. Respondents were also asked to provide feedback regarding the most important issues that should be addressed in a Middle School Education Plan and suggestions about the best way to address those issues. Over 900 persons responded to at least part of the survey; but only two of these responses were to the Spanish version.¹

Key Findings

- In general, parents and students provided higher ratings to students' level of preparation for the transitions from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school than did AISD employees and community members.
- Employees and community members were most likely to indicate that they were thinking of "middle schools in general" while answering the survey, whereas a larger share of parent and student respondents thought specifically of Kealing, Lamar, and Murchison middle schools.
- Responses from parents reflected the district's emphasis on academic rigor and achievement as key challenges. Many parents recommended increasing the level of communication between home and school so that they can be more active participants in supporting their students and assisting with important decisions.
- Student concerns and suggestions mirrored those of the adults who took the survey, especially with regard to preparing students for the rigor of work in higher grade levels, the need for good communication, and building strong supportive relationships between students and teachers.
- Also mirroring the Middle School Level Performance Report's summary of key challenges, employees emphasized a need to address student behavior problems and to increase parent involvement to improve student academic achievement. Employees emphasized more than other respondent groups the importance of offering a wide variety of electives to secondary students, particularly Career and Technology Education (CATE) classes.
- Community members emphasized the importance of educating the "whole child" and finding ways to support social development and physical and mental health in order to ensure that students are ready to learn. They also focused on the importance of parents, teachers, and community groups working together to meet students' needs.

¹ Both respondents to the Spanish version of the survey identified themselves as community members. Their closed-end responses were translated and added to the total responses reported here. Neither respondent provided open-ended comments.

Recommendations

- The perspectives of parents, students, employees, and community members can enrich the district's understanding of the key challenges and strategic response identified in the Middle School Level Report. The Middle School Improvement Plan could act as an important bridge between those documents and this report.
- As the planning process moves forward, a special effort must be made to engage Spanish-speaking parents, students, and community members. Paper-based versions of the survey can be made available at schools and other community locations (e.g. libraries, churches). Spanish language focus groups also might be useful for soliciting feedback.
- Similarly, student voices are somewhat underrepresented in this survey. A special effort should be made to engage students in the planning process. Students will provide invaluable feedback about how structural and policy changes are perceived by students, which can have an impact on the success and sustainability of the changes.
- Rather high rates (25-45%) of non-response to some of the closed-end items on this survey suggest that it may be valuable to pilot test any proposed follow up survey items to ensure that the terminology is clear and that the topics covered are of interest to parent, students, teachers, and community members.

Respondent Type, Focal Schools, and Plan Importance

On the first page of the survey, respondents were asked to identify themselves as current AISD parents, students, or employees, or as members of the community, and to select the AISD middle school² that they would think of as they answered the items that followed. Among parents, the largest percentage of respondents thought of *Middle Schools in General* (19%); however, there also were relatively high numbers of parents indicating Kealing (11%), Lamar (18%), or Murchison (13%) as their focal school. Similarly, there were high percentages of students who responded with Kealing (29%) or Murchison (13%) in mind as they completed the survey. AISD Employees and community members were less likely to indicate a focal school; 73% of employees and 43% of community members indicated that they were thinking of middle schools in general as they completed the survey (see Table 1).

Table 1: Respondent Type and Focal School

	Parent (n = 521)	Student (n = 45)	Employee (n = 229)	Community Member (n = 130)	Overall (n = 925)*
Respondent Type	56%	5%	25%	14%	100%
Focal School					
Bailey	7%	7%	2%	3%	5%
Bedicheck	2%	4%	3%	2%	2%
Burnet	<1%	0%	3%	2%	1%
Covington	2%	0%	3%	1%	2%
Dobie	<1%	0%	3%	3%	1%
Fulmore	3%	2%	3%	2%	3%
Garcia	1%	2%	11%	2%	3%
Kealing	11%	29%	3%	3%	9%
Lamar	18%	2%	3%	7%	12%
Martin	<1%	2%	2%	2%	1%
Mendez	3%	0%	2%	2%	1%
Murchison	13%	16%	3%	2%	9%
O. Henry	6%	4%	3%	1%	4%
Paredes	3%	0%	4%	0%	3%
Pearce	1%	2%	3%	4%	2%
Small	9%	4%	5%	3%	7%
Webb	0%	0%	3%	3%	1%
Middle Schools in General	19%	11%	73%	43%	25%
Not Indicated	4%	13%	10%	17%	7%

*Note. A total of 933 respondents answered at least one item; however, 8 did not identify themselves as members of one these four categories.

² AISD regular middle school campuses and "Middle Schools in General" were included in the list of options. Several respondents noted that special campuses, like the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, should have been included. Some respondents also would have liked the option to choose from among the elementary campuses that have a 6th grade. These preferences should be taken into account in future data collection efforts.

Respondents also were asked to answer the question, “How important is it that AISD develop a Middle School Education Plan?” Across respondent type, the majority indicated that developing a plan was *Very Important*. Students, themselves, were more likely than other respondents to say that the development of a middle school education plan was either *Not Important* or only *Somewhat Important*; however, students comprised a very small proportion (5%) of the total respondents, so this apparent difference of opinion should be interpreted with caution. Interestingly, nearly 25% of all respondents left this question blank, which may indicate that item response options were somewhat unclear or that those who were undecided about the importance of plan development elected to skip this item rather than choose the option *Unsure*.

Table 2: Education Plan Importance

	Parent (n = 521)	Student (n = 45)	Employee (n = 229)	Community Member (n = 130)	Overall (n = 925)
Not at All Important	1%	7%	0%	1%	1%
Somewhat Important	7%	16%	8%	6%	8%
Very Important	68%	36%	66%	64%	65%
Unsure	0%	11%	2%	0%	3%
Not Indicated	21%	31%	24%	38%	24%

Survey Responses

Subsequent pages of the survey asked multiple choice questions regarding how well AISD students are prepared for changes in academic requirements, extracurricular activities, personal development, and interpersonal relationships at two key transition points: the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school. Item response choices were: *Not Well Prepared*, *Slightly Prepared*, *Somewhat Well Prepared*, *Very Well Prepared*, (later recoded on a scale from 1-4 respectively), and *Don't Know*.

It is important to note that fairly large percentages of the 925 persons who identified themselves as a parent, student, employee, or community member chose the option *Don't Know* or did not answer questions about students' preparation for transitions into and out of middle school. As many as 30% of the elementary to middle school and 45% of the middle school to high school item responses were *Don't Know* or blank (see Tables A-1 and A-2). It may be the case that many believed that they did not have enough information about certain aspects of these transitions to make an accurate judgment. It is also possible that they found the survey too long and decided not to complete it.

To determine whether there were meaningful differences in the response patterns of each of these groups, responses of *Don't Know* and those that were left blank were dropped and the remaining data were analyzed using ANOVAs with Tukey post hoc between-group comparisons. Overall means are presented in Tables 3 (transition from elementary to middle school) and 4 (transition from middle school to high school); superscripts indicate when an average score is significantly higher than that of another group. In general, parents and students rated students' level of preparation for each of the transitions higher than did AISD employees and community members. In several cases, the small student sample size may have prevented the detection of additional significant mean differences even though the average scores appear to be higher among students.

Table 3. Average Item Responses for the Stem: “When Thinking of the Transition from Elementary School to Middle School, How Well are AISD Students Prepared for...”

	Parents (a)	Students (b)	Employees (c)	Community Members (d)	Overall Mean
The Rigor of Academic Programs (language arts, math, science, social studies (n =658)	3.1 ^{cd}	3.0 ^{cd}	2.3	2.3	2.8
Middle School Course Requirements (n = 647)	3.0 ^{cd}	2.9 ^{cd}	2.4	2.4	2.8
Expectations in Extracurricular Activities (n = 599)	2.6 ^c	2.5	2.3	2.4	2.5
Knowledge about Student and Family Support Services (n = 574)	2.2 ^d	2.6 ^{cd}	2.0	1.8	2.1
Changes in Relationships with Teachers (n = 638)	2.1 ^{cd}	2.2	1.9	1.8	2.0
Increased Personal Freedom and Responsibility (n = 652)	2.4	2.7 ^{cd}	1.6	1.8	2.1
Changes in Relationships with Friends/Peers (n = 646)	2.2 ^{cd}	2.6 ^{cd}	1.9	1.8	2.1
Changes in Communication Processes with Teachers and Administrators (n = 643)	2.0 ^c	2.2 ^c	1.7	1.7	1.9

Note. ^a indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by parents; ^b indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by students. ^c indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by employees; ^d indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by community members.

Table 4. Average Item Responses for the Stem: “When Thinking of the Transition from Middle School to High School, How Well are AISD Students Prepared for...”

	Parents (a)	Students (b)	Employees (c)	Community Members (d)	Overall Mean
The Rigor of Academic Programs (language arts, math, science, social studies (n =524)	2.5 ^{cd}	2.8 ^d	2.3	2.1	2.4
High School Course Requirements (n = 524)	2.5 ^{cd}	2.9 ^{cd}	2.2	2.0	2.4
Expectations in Extracurricular Activities (n = 490)	2.6	2.9	2.4	3.4	2.5
Knowledge about Student and Family Support Services (n = 473)	2.1	2.7 ^{acd}	2.1	2.0	2.1
Changes in Relationships with Teachers (n = 506)	2.5 ^{cd}	2.6	2.2	2.1	2.3
Increased Personal Freedom and Responsibility (n = 520)	2.5 ^{cd}	3.0 ^{cd}	2.1	1.9	2.3
Changes in Relationships with Friends/Peers (n = 507)	2.5 ^{cd}	2.6	2.2	2.2	2.4
Changes in Communication Processes with Teachers and Administrators (n = 508)	2.3 ^{cd}	2.6 ^d	2.1	1.9	2.2

Note. ^a indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by parents; ^b indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by students. ^c indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by employees; ^d indicates that the average scores are significantly higher than those reported by community members.

Open-Ended Comments

In addition to providing responses to survey items, respondents were asked to provide open-ended responses to the questions: “What do you think are the most important issues and concerns that should be addressed in a Middle School Education Plan?” and “What would be the most effective way to address these issues?”

There were fairly high rates of responses to the open-ended questions. This was particularly true of current AISD parents, 66% of whom entered at least one open-ended comment. Community members and teachers offered open-ended comments at similarly high rates, 62% and 57%, respectively. Students were least likely to answer the open-ended items (36%).

All open-ended comments were read and categorized into one or more of several major themes within respondent group. In each case, the commonly mentioned concerns are listed first with less commonly mentioned concerns following in the rows below. Not all comments

were mentioned frequently enough to be included in these tables, but the entire list of comments has been forwarded to the Associate Superintendent for Middle Schools for his consideration as part of the refinement of the Middle School Education Plan.

Parents

Parents most frequently offered comments about academic rigor and a desire for the curriculum to teach critical thinking skills and important life skills. Some parents have concerns that homework is more busywork than a valuable part of the curriculum. Others mention that excessive homework uses time that could be better spent with family or in extracurricular activities.

Table 5. Parents' Commonly Reported Issues and Concerns, and Suggestions for the Most Effective Ways to Address These Issues

Issues and Concerns	Suggestions
Academic Rigor	Parents want the curriculum to teach critical thinking and life skills such as teamwork, time management, creative thinking, and independence.
Homework	Some parents recommend that homework should be minimized to “level the playing field” for students with varying degrees of parent involvement at home. Others suggest that homework should develop critical thinking skills rather than just take time away from family and other activities.
Home-School Communication	Communication with parents should be improved along with strategies to maximize parent involvement. Parents desire online access to grades and assignments, weekly email updates, and parent conferences with all teachers. They also recommend monitoring whether information actually reaches parents and if schools are welcoming to parents.
Changes in Expectations at Middle School and High School	Students and parents need more information about organizational/study skills, course selections/sequences, and increased personal responsibility at middle and high school. Parents recommend: transition camps, site visits, and meetings with students and teachers from receiving schools. Information should be distributed to those who cannot attend.
Class size	Parents recommend smaller middle school classes so teachers and students can build relationships that foster positive school climate and allow teachers to meet the individual academic needs.
Bullying/Poor Social Skills	Parents suggest that middle schools should actively address bullying and teach social skills that are necessary to encourage positive school climate and strong character.

Parents also offered many comments regarding the need for increased communication between home and school. Although they understand the importance of students taking more responsibility for their work at middle school and high school, parents would like more opportunities to monitor student progress (e.g., online access to grades) and more information so they can help their students make important decisions (e.g., core course and elective selections).

Students

Only 16 students responded to the open-ended comments. However, they provided a range of comments that mirrored the concerns of other groups but were offered from the student perspective. For example, several students noted that an early focus on academic achievement and developing study skills is important. One student noted that advanced academic programs should be available on a wider scale and to students with diverse learning needs. Two respondents suggested that students are sometimes overwhelmed with homework.

Students also suggested better communication between staff and students who are making school transitions. For example, one remarked that students should be aware of attendance policies; another suggested that teachers tell students about rules directly rather than through a “rulebook.” Several students had positive and supportive comments about teachers. One suggested that fellow students should consider teachers someone to talk to in times of need; another noted that there is no need for a Middle School Education Plan, because teachers should decide what to teach and how to teach it. Finally, one student reported hearing that freshman advisories don’t accomplish anything and that they are a “waste of time.”

Student comments overlap with the Middle School Level report’s contents, primarily in the students’ emphasis on the importance of academic achievement for all. In contrast, there is little mention specifically about student-teacher relationships in the Middle School Level Report, whereas student survey respondents emphasize the importance of good communication between teachers and students, teachers’ expertise with the curriculum, and teachers as social supports.

Although the number of open-ended responses from students was limited, the range of topics addressed in these comments suggest that it would be important to include student voices in the Middle School Education Plan development. Students will be able to provide important feedback about the way structural changes and policies are perceived by students, which will be an important factor in the changes’ ultimate ability to have a positive impact.

Employees

AISD employees reported a wide range of issues and concerns that they believe should be addressed in a Middle School Education Plan. The top ranked concern among employee respondents is student behavior, particularly regarding students who are disruptive in class, which makes it difficult to teach the other students.

As was the case in the strategic response within the Level Reports, employees were focused on students’ academic achievement, particularly in the core areas. Employees also

shared a desire to vertically align the curriculum and meet the needs of English Language Learners. However, employee comments focused much more extensively on student disciplinary problems and the need for greater parent involvement than did the Level Report. Employees also believe that increased parent involvement is a critical factor in improving student behavior, engagement, and ultimately, achievement.

Table 7. Employees' Commonly Reported Issues and Concerns, and Suggestions for the Most Effective Ways to Address These Issues

Issues and Concerns	Suggestions
Student Behavior	Teachers desire more parent involvement and communication, removal of disruptive students, consistent discipline, and alternative learning environments for those who need them.
Student Academic Achievement	Teachers recommend more parent involvement, smaller groups, and providing extra resources for those who need them.
Peer Relationships, Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills	Suggestions include: peer mentoring and mediation, and student projects that require working together to achieve a goal.
Scheduling	Teachers recommend a later start to the school day, smaller classes, the appropriate use of block scheduling, and possibly extending the school day.
Limited Availability of CATE and Elective Classes in Middle School	Teachers recommend that CATE classes be made available at all campuses, and that the district finds ways to ensure that middle school students are enrolled in appropriate electives. Many also would like to see more options for electives at middle school.
Rigor of Curriculum, High Expectations	Professional Learning Communities should be utilized to continuously improve teaching. Teachers suggested that there needs to be better communication with parents and ways to encourage more parent involvement.
Student Problem Solving, Organizational, and Study Skills	Teachers suggest using summer camps, advisory, student clubs and organizations to improve these skills.

Community Members

In comparison to other respondent groups, community members more commonly cited a desire to focus on the “whole child” by providing a curriculum that is challenging and relevant and that provides the tools and skills necessary to be a fully-engaged citizen. Community members also frequently offered suggestions that parents and teachers should partner with community organizations to meet children's social, physical, and academic needs.

Table 8. Community Members' Commonly Reported Issues and Concerns, and Suggestions for the Most Effective Ways to Address These Issues

Issues and Concerns	Suggestions
Education of the Whole Child	Suggestions include: providing a relevant curriculum that focused on critical thinking skills and the tools needed to be an engaged, productive citizen. Find ways for parents, teachers, and community groups to work together. Eliminate or reduce focus on TAKS. Provide needed supports to encourage social development, and physical and mental health.
Academic Rigor	Community members recommend vertical alignment of the curriculum and a focus on core academic skills so that students are ready for transitions to middle school and high school. Also suggest focusing on increased student accountability and responsibility for their work as they move into grade levels.
Non-traditional Students/ Different Learning Styles	Suggestions include: smaller classes, more flexibility in the curriculum, and alternative teaching methods and settings so that teachers can better meet the needs of individual students. Also recommended is providing a middle school campus modeled after Garza.
Peer Relationship Skills, Respect for Self and Others	Community members recommend ensuring the availability of social services and finding opportunities to teach social skills and attitudes of fairness and equity during advisory or through counselors.
Changes in Expectations at Middle School and High School	Recommendations include: improving communication with families and involving families in decision-making. Community members also recommend increasing parent awareness of changes in expectations at middle school and high school and the availability of social services.

Appendix A

Table A-1. Percentage of Item Responses for the Stem: “When Thinking of the Transition from Elementary School to Middle School, How Well are AISD Students Prepared for...”

	Not Well Prepared	Slightly Prepared	Somewhat Well Prepared	Very Well Prepared	Don't Know or Blank
The Rigor of Academic Programs (language arts, math, science, social studies)	9%	16%	26%	20%	29%
Middle School Course Requirements	8%	19%	26%	17%	30%
Expectations in Extracurricular Activities	12%	19%	23%	11%	35%
Knowledge about Student and Family Support Services	38%	21%	19%	15%	7%
Changes in Relationships with Teachers	25%	23%	16%	5%	31%
Increased Personal Freedom and Responsibility	23%	22%	18%	7%	30%
Changes in Relationships with Friends/Peers	21%	25%	19%	5%	30%
Changes in Communication Processes with Teachers and Administrators	30%	22%	14%	4%	30%

Table A-2. Percentage of Non-blank Item Responses for the Stem: “When Thinking of the Transition from Middle School to High School, How Well are AISD Students Prepared for...”

	Not Well Prepared	Slightly Prepared	Somewhat Well Prepared	Very Well Prepared	Don't Know
The Rigor of Academic Programs (language arts, math, science, social studies)	14%	15%	19%	9%	43%
High School Course Requirements	13%	17%	19%	8%	43%
Expectations in Extracurricular Activities	9%	17%	19%	8%	47%
Knowledge about Student and Family Support Services	15%	17%	15%	4%	49%
Changes in Relationships with Teachers	13%	17%	18%	6%	46%
Increased Personal Freedom and Responsibility	16%	16%	17%	7%	44%
Changes in Relationships with Friends/Peers	11%	19%	18%	7%	45%
Changes in Communication Processes with Teachers and Administrators	16%	18%	15%	6%	45%