

Bellevue School District

Reimagining Middle Schools Update #2

Purpose

The purpose of this memo is to inform Bellevue School District (BSD) Leaders about the Reimagining Middle School Project (RMS). A PowerPoint Presentation accompanies this memo.

Project Overview

Why reimagine middle schools?

- To create middle schools that offer developmentally responsive, student-centered education.

What does this project include?

- To make recommendations to the BSD Executive Team that includes both a proposed reimagined middle school model and implementation plan.

Who is on the RMS Steering Committee?

- 32 members representing all five comprehensive middle schools and various key stakeholders (staff, students, family members).

How will the RMS Steering Committee develop its proposal?

- Using an Equity-Centered Design Thinking process (Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test) which engages a variety of diverse stakeholders who collectively define the opportunity and collaboratively design solutions.

Key Points

- This is an opportunity to reimagine and redesign systems and structures to better serve our middle school students.
- This is a highly collaborative process. We strive for consensus at each step.
- Various, diverse stakeholders of students, families, staff, and administrators are co-designing together using multiple layers of input and feedback empathy loops.

We are utilizing and considering evidence-based research (*The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* - Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)), best practices, and other successful school models to inform our thinking.

High-Level Timeline

SC Mtg = Steering Committee Meeting

Phase/Milestone/Deliverable/Action Item	When
<i>Project Initiation and Planning</i>	Spring –

	Summer 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research 	Spring 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appoint key staff (Project Sponsor, Project Manager, Project Lead) and establish Core Planning Team 	Spring 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send Team to June AMLE Institute 	Spring 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Form the Steering Committee 	Aug/Sep 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data Dive 	Aug 17 (SC Mtg)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop Charter and Project Plan 	Aug-Sep 2022
<i>Empathize</i>	<i>September 2022</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct Listening Campaign 	Oct 1 – Oct 31
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Listening Panel 	Sep 20 (SC Mtg)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walking and Talking with Level 2 Members 	Sep 20 (SC Mtg)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shadow a Student 	Sep 21 – Oct 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted Student Groups Listening Circles 	October
<i>Define & Prioritize</i>	<i>October 2022</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Debrief Shadow Experiences 	Oct 6 (SC Mtg)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data Synthesis 	Oct 6 (SC Mtg)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach Consensus on Problems/Opportunities Identified and Prioritize Desired Characteristics for New Model 	Oct 20 (SC Mtg)
<i>Ideation</i>	<i>November 2022</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore and Brainstorm Possible Solutions (analyze national models, analyze data collected) 	Nov 3 and 17 (SC Mtg)
<i>Prototype</i>	<i>December 2022 – May 2023</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design Model(s) 	Dec - Feb
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather Feedback (Round 2 of Listening Campaign) 	March
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise Model(s) 	April-May
<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>June 2023</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share Recommendations with Executive Team 	June 2023
<i>Create Implementation Plan</i>	<i>August – December 2023</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop Implementation Plan for New Model(s) 	August-September
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather Feedback 	October
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise Implementation Plans 	November
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalize Implementation Plan and Share Recommendations with Executive Team 	December
<i>Planning for Implementation</i>	<i>January-June 2024</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create Schedules 	Jan-Feb 2024
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent Information Night 	Jan-Feb 2024
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Registration 	Jan-Feb 2024
<i>Initial OR Full Implementation (scale of implementation will be determined based on Recommended Model and Implementation Plan)</i>	<i>Fall 2024</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch new model (small scale or full-scale TBD) 	Fall 2024

Where we've been (August 2022 – January 2023)

Understanding the Opportunity (Empathize & Define)

Following the equity-centered design thinking approach, the first two phases of our work focused on *empathizing* with stakeholders to understand their needs and collaboratively *defining* the problems/opportunities we aim to solve. To authentically understand the experiences of our middle school students, families, and staff, we spent time engaging with stakeholders in their environments. Round 1 of our Listening Campaign took place from September to November and included middle school students, family members and guardians, BSD staff RMS Steering Committee Level 1 and Level 2 Members via surveys, interviews, listening circles, “Shadowing-a-Student” for a day, student outreach visits during school lunch periods, staff outreach visits during the school day, and partnerships with school PTSAs. Most of the data collected during Round 1 of the Listening Campaign was qualitative in nature and focused on gathering stakeholder feedback about what they would include in the design of their dream middle school and identifying what they like about the current middle school experience.

Two key student needs emerged from the work we did during the “empathize” phase:

1. **Well-Being:** Students' social-emotional, belonging, and personal needs are foundational to learning. Middle school students want to belong and be valued members of their school community. To make this a reality, students need sufficient, intentional time and opportunities throughout the day to socialize, build deep, meaningful relationships with peers and school staff, as well as take care of their personal needs (e.g., bathroom, water, food, movement, relaxation, etc.).
2. **Academic Learning:** Ideally defined by student voice, choice, and responsibility in relevant, challenging, interactive, engaging, empowering environments. Middle school students want choice and autonomy in their academic learning. They need learning that is accessible, important, relevant, interactive, engaging, and empowering. They want to feel excited, inspired, and challenged to learn, grow, and be responsible. They want to feel like their learning is going somewhere—that it serves a purpose and is preparing them for their future.

With these student needs in mind, we then focused on collaboratively defining the particular problems or opportunities that need to be solved. We reached consensus on the following nine opportunities for improving in the middle school student experience:

1. Students do not have enough meaningful connection to/with peers and adults.
2. Students want and need a strong sense of belonging at school.
3. Students experience irrelevant instruction and use of time in class.
4. There is a disconnect between the skills students are being taught and the skills they need to succeed in the future.
5. Students need to be meaningfully engaged and able to use their voices.
6. Students lack interactive learning environments.
7. The middle school day and classes are not typically structured in a way that empower students and promotes ownership of their own learning.
8. Students need break time during the school day.
9. There is no bridge to support 5th grade students as they transition into middle school.

We also acknowledged that for every action we take to redesign our comprehensive middle schools, there will be a reaction. Each decision may affect many people and we need to be aware of potential unintended consequences.

Moving from understanding students' needs and defining opportunities, our next step was to create a shared vision for what the ideal middle school experience could be. Collaboratively, the RMS Steering Committee created the following vision:

Reimagining Middle School (RMS) Vision: *"We will redesign the middle school experience to offer a developmentally responsive, student-centered education."*

- Rooted in relationships
- Meets students where they are
- Social interactions and social-emotional needs
- Learning environment and academic interactions
- Bridge between elementary and high school

Exploring Possible Solutions (Define & Ideate)

To set the Steering Committee up for the Ideate phase of work, we co-developed brainstorming prompts using the following criteria:

- ✓ Based on identified student need
- ✓ Aligned with our RMS vision
- ✓ Written positively in a way that invites action
- ✓ Broad enough to ensure many creative ideas
- ✓ Avoids suggesting a particular solution

The prompts were crafted in the format of *"How Might We..."* questions. The Steering Committee came to consensus on the following prompt to guide brainstorming:

"How might we design a middle school experience that...partners with the greater community to support/provide experiential, expeditionary, project/problem-based learning opportunities (solving real-world problems within the community)?"

We started brainstorming during a full day RMS Steering Committee meeting on November 17th. We spent the day learning and ideating together. Working in small groups, teams began exploring possible solutions to answer the *"How Might We..."* guiding question. By the end of the day, some common themes began to emerge:

- Project-based and hands-on learning
- Teaming teachers and cohorting students
- Block scheduling or longer class periods
- Advisory / Homeroom to build community, teach SEL, study skills, and bullying prevention education

We continued brainstorming during a second ideation session in mid-December where we revisited our initial ideas, looked for commonalities and continued iterating. We used AMLE's Characteristics of Successful Middle Schools (*Culture and Community; Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; and Leadership and Organization*) to organize our ideas into RMS Design Dimensions. After we completed

grouping and sorting similar ideas, we had close to thirty possible solutions to consider moving forward into the next stage of our work: Prototyping.

To help cull the list, the Steering Committee took a survey where each member ranked the solutions, they believed would best accomplish the vision and address one or more of the nine identified opportunities. Survey results revealed the following Top 11 Solutions for Reimagining the BSD Middle School Experience:

1. Project-based learning with support and collaboration; Hands-on learning; Involves authentic audiences and academically integrated project-based work
2. Teacher teams with student cohorts
3. Advisory or Homeroom to build community, teach SEL, bullying prevention, and study skills
4. Block scheduling or longer class periods
5. Cross-building and level student collaboration and mentorship
6. Focus on Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
7. Co-teachers: More, training, support, and looping
8. Student-led conferences, student-led IEP meetings, etc. (minimum 1x year)
9. Embed SEL and executive functioning skills
10. Blocked classes (e.g., one teacher for Language Arts and Social Studies)
11. More elective and CTE choices that reflect student needs and input; core disciplines incorporated

To decide which solutions to move forward into prototyping, the Steering Committee centered ourselves again on the RMS Vision, the nine identified opportunities, and AMLE's Essential Attributes (Responsive, Challenging, Empowering, Equitable, and Engaging) and Characteristics of Successful Middle Schools (*Culture and Community; Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; and Leadership and Organization*).

Before beginning to prototype, the Steering Committee's next charge was to prioritize the 11 top solutions based on greatest student impact and feasibility of implementation. Working in two large groups, we identified four solutions for prototyping:

1. Project-Based Learning (PBL)
2. Teacher Teams with Student Cohorts
3. Block Scheduling
4. Advisory / Homeroom

More information on each of the four solution is provided below.

1. Project-based Learning (PBL)
 - *General Description:* "Project Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which student learn by actively engaging in local and global issues and personally meaningful projects.¹"

⁴ASCD:

- *Goal:* Students work on a project for an extended period of time that answers a complex question focused on solving local and/or global issues and demonstrate knowledge and skills through a public product or presentation for an authentic audience.
- *Problems/Opportunities Addressed:*
 - Irrelevant instruction and use of time
 - There is a disconnect between the skills being taught and the skills needed to success in the future
 - Sense of meaningful engagement and student voice
 - Students lack interactive learning environments
 - The school day and classes are not typically structured in a way that empower students and promotes their ownership of learning
- *Key Structural Elements May Include:* substantial time for teacher training, ongoing support, planning, and collaboration, and revision; teacher teaming; block scheduling that allows for chunks of uninterrupted project time.

2. Teacher Teams with Student Cohorts

- *General Description:* “Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (e.g. teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning” and these smaller communities “are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships²”
- *Goal:* Promote a strong sense of community and instructional coherence by having a group of students get to know a few teachers well, while also interacting with a cohort of peers, and by having a set of teachers dedicated to their assigned students’ experience and success in middle school, who collaborate frequently and effectively on instruction.
- *Problems/Opportunities Addressed:*
 - Not enough meaningful connection to/with peers and adults
 - Sense of belonging
 - There is no bridge to 5th grade students to transition to middle school
- *Key Structural Elements May Include:* interdisciplinary teaching teams anchored by common planning time and regular examination of student data; student cohorts anchored by a common teaching team; an assigned “mentor teacher” who loops with their student cohort for all three middle school years.

3. Block Scheduling

- *General Description:* “a block schedule is a scheduling system for the middle- or high-school day, usually by replacing a more traditional schedule of six or seven 40–50-minute daily periods with longer class periods that meet fewer times each day and week. For instance, a typical block-schedule class might last for 90 to 120 minutes and meet every other day instead of daily³”
- *Goal:* To maximize student learning by increasing the time spent each day in deep, extended learning and reducing interruptions (transitions to different classes, taking

²*Middle Matters; Linked Learning*

³*The Edvocate*

attendance, etc.) and stress (having to keep up with seven different classes and assignments, teachers, and sets of students); to promote deeper teacher-student relationships; to allow teachers to individualize instruction and support fewer students.

- *Problems/Opportunities Addressed:*
 - Not enough meaningful connection to/with peers and adults
 - Sense of belonging
 - Irrelevant instruction and use of time
 - Sense of meaningful engagement
 - Students need break time
 - There is no bridge to 5th grade students to transition to middle school
- *Key Structural Elements May Include:* substantial time for teacher training, planning, and collaboration to ensure efficient, effective teaching within the block context; significant changes to schools' master schedule.

4. Advisory/Homeroom

- *General Description:* Advisory/Homeroom programs “are designed to create a strong support system that students need to develop academically, socially, and emotionally.”⁴
- *Goal:* Each middle school has an “advisory” or “homeroom” program to engage students, build community, ensure each student and family is known and supported by at least one teacher, explicitly teach SEL, bullying prevention, and study skills, and prepare students for transitions (e.g., 6th graders entered middle school, 8th graders exiting middle school). Such a program supports students individually, while promoting a positive overall school culture.
- *Problems/Opportunities Addressed:*
 - Not enough meaningful connection to/with peers and adults
 - Sense of belonging
 - There is no bridge to 5th grade students to transition to middle school
 - Sense of meaningful engagement and student voice
- *Key Structural Elements May Include:* an assigned “mentor teacher” who loops with their Advisory/Homeroom student cohort for all three middle school years; some time for teacher training, ongoing support, planning, collaboration, and revision.

Prior to prototyping, the team visited five innovative middle schools (in- and out-of-state) to observe and experience best practices in action. The innovative middle schools visited included:

- Intrinsic Schools- Belmont Campus (Chicago, IL)
- Ellen Fletcher Middle School (Palo Alto, CA)
- Design39 Campus (San Diego, CA)
- Summit Atlas (West Seattle)
- Odyssey Multiage Program (Grades 7-8) (Bainbridge Island, WA)

⁴ Friends' Central School; Education Week

Where we are now (February – June 2023)

Reflecting and Testing (Prototype and Test)

Prototyping is the phase in design-thinking where ideas come to life in the physical world. Prototypes can be in any form – written, role-play, activity, space, drawing, etc. – and are most successful when people (the design team, user, and others) can experience and interact with them to provide meaningful feedback. The purpose of prototyping and testing is to explore and refine solutions with users (both those implementing and those impacted) before implementation begins. The idea is to experiment our way forward.

For the next couple months, the RMS Steering Committee will build and test prototypes with staff, students, and families prior to making recommendations to the Executive Team. There are four cycles of iterations planned:

- Prototype Session I (February 2): Steering Committee worked in small teams (subgroups) to prototype one of the four solutions described above.
 - Feedback loop: Between Sessions I and II, Steering Committee Members shared their prototype(s) with at least one student, staff, parent, or other interested person for feedback.

- Prototype Session II (February 7): Steering Committee Members share what they learned about Prototype 1 and begin revisions for Prototype II.
 - During this meeting, groups will gather feedback from other members of the Steering Committee to drive revisions and improvements to the Prototype II.
 - Feedback loop: Between Sessions II and III, the team will begin Round 2 of the RMS Listening Campaign, beginning with outreach to middle school staff. We are intentionally beginning with staff so that we hear first from those who will be responsible for implementing the proposed changes. We will revise the prototypes based on staff feedback, before sharing with other stakeholder groups (students and families/guardians).

- Prototype Session III and Learning from School Visits (March 9): Steering Committee Members who visited innovative middle schools will share their learnings and takeaways with the Steering Committee. New ideas will be included as revisions in Prototype III.
 - Feedback loop: Round 2 of the RMS Listening Campaign continues, adding both students and families/guardians to the outreach effort. The format will include face-to-face interactions with target groups such as MLL/Dual, Special Education, Black Student Union (BSU), Leadership class, and Advanced Learning to ensure the team is hearing from varied student populations, including those who have historically been underserved.

- Prototype Session IV (March 23): The Steering Committee will review and make sense of data from outreach to students and families/guardians, and we will include revisions in Prototype IV.
 - Feedback loop: Survey to be completed by students, families/guardians, and staff.

- Formulate Recommendations (April 20): The Steering Committee will use the survey data to collaboratively formulate recommendations to share with the BSD Executive Team for a reimagined middle school model.

Where We're Going (June 2023 – Fall 2024)

Reflecting and Testing (Prototype and Test)

The team is currently on track to share proposed recommendations for a new middle school model with the Executive Team in June 2023. Once a model is approved, the team will continue our work by developing implementation plans. However, it should be noted that implementation is top of mind as the team designs possible models and considers feasibility, capacity, and expected impact of proposed solutions.

Our goal is to continue designing with stakeholders and include them in implementation planning. We will likely seek members to join the RMS Implementation Team to ensure we have additional voices and varied representation of those who be impacted by or involved with changes to middle school. We hope to finalize implementation plans by December 2023, with timelines to be created in January – February 2024. The proposed launch for a reimagined middle school model is Fall 2024.