

# Schools to Watch: A Second View

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In December 1999, The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform selected two “Schools to Watch” that are well on their way to achieving a vision for excellence in middle level education (see the February 2000 issue of *Middle Ground* for a more complete description). At that time, we were still looking for a large urban school that came close to meeting our standards. After reopening the search, we selected two more Schools to Watch. We chose them not because they are perfect, but because they have embarked on a clear course to ensure that all students have access to academically rigorous courses and developmentally responsive guidance. The two new Schools to Watch are Freeport Intermediate School in Freeport, Texas, and Thurgood Marshall Middle School in Chicago.

As members of The National Forum’s Schools to Watch committee, we visited these institutions and spoke with students, teachers, business partners, counselors, administrators, and parents. We observed classes and attended planning and team meetings. What follows is a small sample of the practices we observed. You can read more about these schools and the criteria we used to evaluate them on our Web site at [www.mgforum.org](http://www.mgforum.org). Full-length case studies on all four Schools to Watch will be completed sometime this fall.

## ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

*Criterion: All students are expected to meet high academic standards. The curriculum, assessment, and instruction are aligned with standards.*

Like all public schools in Texas, Freeport Intermediate School must prepare students for the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). One of our concerns was that teachers would feel compelled to spend too much classroom time teaching to the test without thinking deeply about what they were doing. We didn’t find this to be true. In one class, we observed students reviewing a practice test from the state’s 1998 reading assessment. After the teacher went through the questions in detail, she gave the students a test-taking tip: Complete the most difficult problems first, when you are still fresh, and save the most interesting or easiest questions for last. The teacher then read a lengthy passage out loud as her students followed along silently. Throughout this exercise, the class would stop to discuss the root meanings of difficult words. They learned how to find the definition of an unfamiliar word by using context clues or looking for appositives. As the class continued, the teacher peppered the conversation with examples from music and television, connecting the material to her students’ lives. She asked them to focus on the phrasing of questions. Is it a generalization? An inference? Does it require analysis?

Although this example shows that the teacher was preparing students to take the test, she went beyond simple drilling of facts. She and other teachers at Freeport use test preparation as a tool to help students think more deeply about how and why they learn.



*Criterion: The adults in the school have time to plan, select, and engage in professional development that is aligned with nationally recognized standards. They collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum and effective instruction.*

At Thurgood Marshall Middle School, all of the teachers follow the Illinois State Standards and the Chicago Public School Learning Standards, but small teams of teachers determine how they will design and deliver the curriculum to meet the needs of their students.

“Teachers know what is valued,” said Principal Jose Barillas. “They align their work with the standards.”

As a result, many teams feel free to experiment. For example, one team develops integrated curriculum units throughout the year. Team members decide which topic to explore and then, using the standards, design the unit together. While we were there, the team was developing a unit on inventions. One teacher had brought materials from an inventions convention she had attended. Her teaching partners shared ideas for expanding the project, offering and receiving feedback without fear of judgment. In social studies and language arts classes, they decided that students would examine legal issues, learn the difference between a patent and a copyright, and explore the history of inventions in the United States. In math and science, they planned to ask students to work in small groups and design products that would solve real problems, then present their inventions to the school and the community.

### DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS

*Criterion: The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student’s intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. The school groups adults and students in small learning communities characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.*

Although Freeport Intermediate School has no formal advisory program, students report that the school feels like a second home. Stand in the school office on any given day and you probably will hear one of the students affectionately refer to a member of the staff as “Mom.”

The tightly knit structure of the school’s teams ensures that each student will be well known by several members of the faculty. Teachers regularly discuss their students’ academic and emotional needs. In addition, students receive encouragement and inspiration through academic pep rallies, which take place every six weeks. Principal Clara Sale-Davis once rode into the gym on her horse to the cheers of the entire student body. Other teachers routinely dress up in costumes and perform skits for the students. Teams often chant songs and inspirational rhymes they have written for the occasion. The entire community comes together to celebrate and encourage achievement.



**Criterion:** *The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.*

Thurgood Marshall Middle School has a strong partnership with Youth Guidance, a Chicago program that serves at-risk students in the city core, providing counseling, support for parent involvement initiatives, and faculty training. At Thurgood Marshall, Youth Guidance is written into the School Improvement Plan. Working with Youth Guidance, staff members determine which services are most needed, such as a dance program. They chose dance because it was the only artistic course that was not offered through the school's regular exploratory program. Lisa Merth, a regional supervisor for Youth Guidance, said Thurgood Marshall is one of the best schools the group works with because of its collaborative decision-making and the strong cooperation from the teachers.

### SOCIAL EQUITY

**Criterion:** *All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.*

Inclusion is the norm at Freeport Intermediate School because of the principal's relentless determination to make it so. Freeport has the school district's highest percentage of students considered at risk of failure. The school has a six-person special education staff — three are full-time teachers and three are full-time aides. Sale-Davis traded a teacher position for two aides to assist special education students in regular classrooms. Because some staff members were reluctant to embrace full inclusion, Sale-Davis decided to start with a small pilot program. After receiving positive feedback on the initial project, she took advantage of a local initiative called "Building Inclusive Schools," which provided free training to help teachers develop more effective techniques for serving a wide range of students in the same classroom.

**Criterion:** *Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected.*

The students in Susanna Lang's language arts classes at Thurgood Marshall Middle School are published writers. In 1999, Lang received a grant from the Teachers 8c Writers Collaborative to publish *Our Hearts in Writing*, an anthology of stories and poems written by her students. Lang believes every student has a story worth telling, and she gives them regular opportunities to share their tales through journals and class discussions. She let the students select the pieces to be included in the anthology, even when she disagreed with their choices.

"This project is all about empowering the kids," she said.

All but one of her students contributed to the book. When the paperbacks arrived from the publisher, the students had a tangible reminder that their voices are recognized and respected at Thurgood Marshall.

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