

Noe Middle School — A “NOE-ticeable” Difference in Education

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About Our School

Noe Middle School is an urban school of approximately 1,300 students in Louisville, Kentucky. Noe has one of the most diverse student populations in Jefferson County public schools. Approximately 35% of the student population lives in the school’s surrounding neighborhood, one of the community’s highest poverty areas. Roughly one third of that population lives in one of the city’s largest urban subsidized public housing developments. Noe offers two of the district’s magnet programs, the Gifted and Talented Magnet and the Visual and Performing Arts Magnet. Students enrolled in these two magnet programs travel to Noe from throughout the county and represent virtually every socioeconomic level of our community. In addition to these programs, Noe also provides an English as a second language program for approximately 80 students, representing 20 different languages and cultures. Approximately 10% of students receive exceptional child educational services. Noe’s racial profile includes 56% Caucasian students, 35% African American, and 8% from other races. Fifty-one percent of the students are on free or reduced-price lunch, which includes approximately 85% of our neighborhood population.

As the largest middle school in Jefferson County, we work for a small school “feel.” We make students feel welcome through the strong team structure that is in place. We pride ourselves on being a school where students want to be, whether they live in our neighborhood area or come from across the county for our magnet programs. A parent recently e-mailed saying it became clear to her quickly that “Noe is a place where the people are happy.” At Noe Middle, we celebrate our diversity and the accepting attitudes of our students and staff.

We believe that the culture of a middle school sets the tone for the academics. We recognize our students with celebrations such as Students of the Month, Most Improved Students, and Cougar Rewards. Each grading period, every student on the honor roll is recognized with a treat. Any student who has brought up grades (BUG) without letting a grade drop gets a bug sticker and a treat, even if they did not make the honor roll. We acknowledge student accomplishments in our *Paw Prints* newsletter and with various end-of-year ceremonies. We also recognize our staff for the extra steps they take for students, including *Pats on the Back* newsletters, CATS Cookout Celebration, Perfect Attendance Luncheons, birthday cards with candy, administrator-served desserts, and end-of-year We Noe-ticed Awards. Throughout the year, we thank our faculty and staff with notes and treats to show appreciation. All of these recognitions, for both staff and students, make Noe Middle an inclusive, caring, and friendly place to be.

Data analysis is another strength. We examine data carefully and use data to make decisions schoolwide, within departments and in individual classrooms. Our primary analysis is related to CATS results. Teachers examine the results and then discuss what caused the results, areas we need to focus on, and strategies to reach all students. In addition, mathematical goals are set for each department so that they can contribute their part to our overall Accountability Index.

As a staff, we work hard to do whatever it takes to help students be successful. We believe that all students can learn. We have many organizational structures and systems in place to help students reach proficiency. We monitor the progress of struggling students and make sure that there are enough safety nets in place to ensure their success. Some of these are the Academic Success Program (where students can stay after school to finish and complete missing assignments), mentoring, Book Buddies, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Extended School Services, small pull-out reading groups, small-group math instruction, Saturday School, and eSchool.

After school time is just as important as time during the school day. Currently over 40 activities are available. Some of these are competitive and some are open to anyone who just wants to be involved.

Many participate in more than one of our wide variety, including fencing, volleyball, quick recall, Builders Club, MathCounts, basketball, cheerleading, and Step Team to name a few. We know that involvement at the middle school level is one of the keys to success.

Our biggest challenge is to continue to reduce the number of referrals and suspensions. What this really means is that we find ways to teach students strategies for proper behavior and teachers strategies for engaging students. For the last five years, Noe has been implementing CHAMPs and Foundations (developed by Randall Sprick). This program has made a positive impact in this area. This is a top priority and an agenda item on each nonflexible Professional Development Day. Addressing this issue will have many positive effects on the school, including higher attendance and greater student achievement.

Noe Middle School was named a School to Watch in 2007. In 2005, Noe was named a National PTA Parent Involvement School of Excellence. The National Association for Secondary School Principals awarded Noe Bridge Builder grants to support parent involvement in 2003 and 2005. These recognitions are affirmations of the positive things that are happening.

As a true middle school, we are concerned about the whole child—academic excellence, social equity, and developmental responsiveness. We strive to keep a balance among these areas. Everything we do reflects our mission: “Student Success Is The Goal Of All School Activity.”

Organizational Structures

The Administrative Team at Noe is a very cohesive group consisting of the principal, instructional assistant principal, 3 grade level administrators, instructional support teacher, and a youth services center coordinator. With one exception, this team has been together for nine years. The Administrative Team prides itself in modeling “team” for the academic teams in the building. We strive for excellence and responsiveness. Our school community appreciates this. Members of the Administrative Team and teacher leaders (department chairs, writing cluster leader, school technology coordinator) are part of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). This group directs the overall instructional plan in the building, including professional development. The ILT meets monthly.

As part of our efforts to improve instruction in the building this year, we have some specific structures in place. These include the use of the classroom instructional framework and administrative walk-throughs. The process we use to develop our Comprehensive School Improvement Plan is the hallmark of our success.

Classroom Instructional Framework

As part of a district initiative to improve instruction, principals received training on the development and use of the classroom instructional framework. This is a basic reminder of what good instruction is and includes “entering activities,” the “anticipatory set,” “interactive teaching and learning,” “guided practice,” “independent practice,” and “closure.” Video segments of teachers implementing each of these areas were shared with teachers in professional development sessions. Teachers then were to apply these instructional practices in their classrooms. Some teachers adapted lesson plans to reflect the framework.

Administrative Walk-Through

Members of the Administrative Team regularly conduct walk-throughs in classrooms. This gives administrators a sense of what is being taught and how. Feedback is given to teachers based on the activity of both the teacher and the students in the classroom. These walk-throughs are just a quick glimpse, but they do provide some sense of what is happening.

Development and Implementation of the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan

At Noe we attribute much of our success to the development and implementation of the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). The Instructional Leadership Team, the Site-Based Decision-Making Council (SBDM), and other interested staff meet an average of 10–12 times over a 2-month period to review data, determine needs, and revise and add strategies or activities. Once a draft is produced, staff and parents have input prior to the CSIP being formally presented to the SBDM Council. Our CSIP is a dynamic document. Every activity/strategy is implemented and evidence is collected. Implementation and “impact checks” are completed three times a year and shared with the SBDM Council.

Accountability Measures

Schoolwide, we have several practices in place that impact all academic areas. Each grading period, teachers incorporate at least two open-response items into their instruction. Along with a scoring guide and sample student work, these items are collected and reviewed during Binder Review. The principal and assistant principal meet with teams to discuss student progress. Data from open responses are entered into the Classroom Assessment System and Community Access Dashboard for Education (CASCADE). Teachers can then determine if students know and understand core content or if reteaching is necessary. Teachers also use performance tasks and technology tasks as instructional tools. These types of activities allow students to be actively engaged in their learning. All teams give students learning styles inventories at the beginning of the school year. This allows students to understand how they learn best and reminds teachers that there are different types of learners in their classrooms—they must differentiate to meet their needs.

Binder Review

Binder Review is a regular practice that began at Noe in 1996 when we were named a school in decline. It was designed by a team of teachers and administrators seeking ways to improve our state test scores and move to a more positive rating. Students are required to complete open-response items each grading period. Teachers follow three students representing various levels of achievement throughout the year. At the end of each grading period, the principal and assistant principal meet with the team of teachers who share their binder. The administrators review the binder, checking for compliance. Discussion takes place regarding the progress of students and other pertinent topics. Each year as we review our CSIP, we survey teachers on what we should keep, change, or delete. Overwhelmingly (with at least 95% in favor), teachers want to keep this practice.

CASCADE

The district has created this system for school use. Responses to multiple-choice items and scores for open response items are scanned. Feedback includes class information regarding percentages of right and wrong, percentages of who knows and doesn't know specific core content, and calculated academic indexes that mimic our state testing. This feedback is instrumental for teachers to adjust instruction for students. Teachers can also see information for individual students. Principals have access to specially designed reports that give information at the student level, teacher level, grade level, and department level. Teachers are required to scan information for their classes for district-designed assessments. This helps us monitor where we are as a school and helps to predict our outcomes on state tests.

Performance Tasks

Performance tasks are instructional activities that allow students to demonstrate their learning. We believe that students should be actively involved in their learning. If students are regularly doing performance tasks, they will be. Teachers in all content areas are required to submit one performance task to the principal some time during the year. This performance task should be an ongoing part of the teacher's instruction. Sample student work is submitted with the task. Math teachers are required to turn in four performance tasks, one for each math strand: Number, Algebraic Thinking, Data and Statistics, and Geometry.

Technology Tasks

Technology is incorporated into all content areas. Language arts teachers are primarily responsible for teaching word processing skills; math teachers are responsible for spreadsheet; social studies teachers for presentations. Science teachers and related-arts teachers use technology after other team teachers have taught the skills. All eighth grade students are required to take the Computer Assessment. This helps to ensure that all students are technology literate and developing 21st century skills. Each teacher sends evidence for two technology tasks and sample student work to the principal. Technology tasks also include database, content area software, and Internet use.

Safety Nets

Student progression toward promotion is a data-intensive process. Each grade level administrator compiles a spreadsheet to track student progress through out the year. There are periodic updates shared among the administrative staff, teams of teachers, and with the individual student and his or her parents. To ensure the success of all students, we have developed several programs that provide interventions for those struggling. Along with each of these programs, there are many other opportunities for students to receive individual and small-group assistance. Many teachers voluntarily work with students after school. All of these efforts have resulted in minimal retention at Noe. In the last three years, fewer than five students (out of 1,300+) have been retained.

Summer Transitions Camp

In early August, we invite our neighborhood students to a weeklong summer camp. The program assists 6th graders transitioning to middle school and gives the 7th and 8th graders a leg up for the upcoming school year. The academic focus is on math and reading, but the relationships that are built are even more important. We conclude the program with a parent dinner to give parents who are normally not involved an opportunity to connect to staff and school, easing their anxiety, it is hoped.

After School ESS

This Extended School Service program focuses on building math and reading skills in students who are performing below grade level. The program meets two days a week after school and functions on a small-group model with direct instruction of basic skills. Snacks and transportation are provided.

Academic Success

Academic Success meets twice a week after school. Students are signed up through teacher and parent recommendations. Work is compiled by the team teachers and is aimed at catching up on missing assignments. We have many BETA Club members who assist as peer tutors.

Saturday School

Students are required to complete school-designed modules if they do not score at the apprentice level or higher on our State Accountability Test. These modules are organized into three different areas: writing, reading, and math. Teachers are assigned to the small groups and focus on the core content of the accountability test. Students attend Saturdays for about five sessions in each of the needed topics. At the end of the sessions, students are tested to see if they perform at an apprentice level. School administrators rotate to open the building and supervise the sessions.

Course Recovery

Students are assigned to the computer lab for Course Recovery instead of an elective class if they are failing math and/or reading. Students who complete the online course can replace their current grade. Once the student completes the online course, he or she may return to an elective course. The program allows students to move seamlessly from course to course. Students are motivated to finish Course Recovery quickly. Our technology teacher is available to assist students with the online course work.

Summer ESS

This Extended School Service program meets during the first few weeks of summer vacation. The program is organized to give students an opportunity to receive credit for courses they failed during the school year while providing them with enrichment activities and tutoring. The program follows a small-group format. Students who need to earn 1–2 credits to pass to the next grade and those who earned grades of D or U in any subject are encouraged to attend this program.

Conclusion

Diversity, creativity, and academic excellence—these are the hallmarks of Noe Middle School. By providing engaging courses and recognizing the talents of each child, Noe prepares students for the demands of high school, honoring their youthful enthusiasm and desire to make a difference in the world.