

Cleveland County Schools: Cultivating Systems of Excellence in the Middle Grades

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Cleveland County Schools, located in the foothills of North Carolina, has made rapid and measurable strides in middle-level education—transforming all four middle schools from low-performing status to models of growth through focused leadership, collaboration, and innovation. Serving more than 3,000 students across four middle schools, the district’s approach is grounded in clarity, collaboration, and consistency. Each initiative, from instructional frameworks to professional learning systems, reflects a shared belief that every student deserves a guaranteed, viable curriculum and equitable access to high-quality instruction.

A Framework for Continuous Improvement

The district’s middle schools operate within a cohesive improvement framework aligned with the North Carolina State Board of Education’s goals. School Improvement Plans are intentionally designed to reflect state priorities while addressing local needs in academics, attendance, and behavior.

At the heart of this work is the High Reliability Schools (HRS) framework, which offers a research-based pathway for sustained growth. Cleveland County’s middle schools have (and continue to) work through Levels 1 (Safe, Supportive, and Collaborative Culture) and 2 (Effective Teaching in Every Classroom) and are now focused on Level 3, ensuring a guaranteed and viable curriculum. The emphasis on

evidence-based systems, collective commitments, and measurable results ensures that each school’s progress is both intentional and sustainable.

Consistency and Collaboration in Instruction

A defining feature of the district’s success is its unified Instructional Framework, which outlines expectations for lesson design, delivery, and student engagement. Teachers work in collaborative teams, Professional Learning Teams (PLTs), to unpack standards, design lessons, and respond to assessment data. The school is considered the Professional Learning Community (PLC). This consistent structure allows educators to focus on learning rather than teaching, ensuring that instructional practices directly impact student outcomes.

Every middle school follows a common bell schedule, providing equitable instructional time and embedded opportunities for teacher collaboration. These shared planning periods extend beyond individual schools; district-wide virtual sessions and semester-based best-practice showcases allow teachers across all campuses to learn from one another.

Instructional Innovation and Targeted Support

Cleveland County’s instructional priorities are grounded in balanced assessment and

student-centered practices. Teachers use diagnostic, formative, and common formative assessments to monitor progress and adjust core instruction in real time.

The district has also adopted a comprehensive core curriculum—Ready Math, Savvas English Language Arts, and Ready Reading—ensuring a consistent scope and sequence across all schools. This adoption provides students with a guaranteed and viable curriculum, while teachers benefit from aligned pacing and shared professional learning.

A hallmark of the district's instructional innovation is its implementation of the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. SIM strategies—such as LINC'S Vocabulary Routines, Word Mapping—are embedded across all core classes, supporting literacy development in every subject. Fundamentals of Sentence Writing is taught in English Language Arts classes to strengthen students' writing skills and enhance their reading comprehension. Ongoing literacy coaching and co-teaching models strengthen instructional delivery, ensuring that every student can access and master rigorous content.

Building Leadership and Capacity

Cleveland County's middle schools thrive because of their deliberate focus on capacity building. Instructional coaches, trained in Dr. Jim Knight's Impact Cycle, provide job-embedded coaching and feedback to teachers. Literacy and math facilitators lead PLTs weekly, helping teams refine lessons, analyze data, and improve instructional practices.

Structured instructional rounds, based on the work of Vicki Wilson, within and across schools, foster collective efficacy among leaders and teachers. These rounds,

coupled with a district-built classroom walkthrough instrument and dashboard, allow administrators to analyze trends, identify needs, and celebrate strengths across grade levels, content areas, and the whole school.

District-level teams, including the Adolescent Literacy Leadership Team and the Co-Teaching Team, guide professional learning, ensuring that improvements are systemic rather than isolated. The Adolescent Literacy Leadership Team members represent classroom teachers, administrators, instructional coaches, English Learner support, and Exceptional Children's teachers and facilitators. They discuss and address the resources needed to support classroom instruction and students' literacy skill acquisition, and provide feedback on current district literacy initiatives. The Co-Teaching team is represented by Exceptional Children's teachers, Exceptional Children's Program Facilitators, and Regular Education teachers who provide co-teaching. This team discusses the different models of co-teaching, how to implement these models, and addresses any barriers to providing the models in the classroom. Through these teams, Cleveland County Schools cultivates leadership at every level, creating a culture of shared accountability and collective growth.

Supporting the Whole Child

Cleveland County recognizes that success in the middle grades extends beyond academics. The district's approach integrates systems for attendance, behavior, and social-emotional learning (SEL) to ensure that every student feels connected and supported. Schools implement proactive strategies that strengthen relationships and reinforce positive behavior, aligning with the district's belief that relationships are the

foundation for achievement. By administering behavior and social-emotional benchmark assessments, schools can proactively screen students and determine the need for additional support to promote their success in school.

Sustaining Success Through Professional Learning

Professional learning in Cleveland County Schools is purposeful, ongoing, and aligned to district priorities. Training and coaching are embedded throughout the school year to meet evolving needs. Teacher leaders are intentionally developed to sustain district initiatives, reducing dependency on external support and ensuring long-term impact.

Looking ahead, the district remains focused on refining MTSS alignment within the HRS framework, strengthening

collaborative team processes, and embedding literacy strategies across all content areas. By maintaining these priorities, Cleveland County Schools ensures that its middle-level programs remain responsive, rigorous, and reflective of best practice.

Cultivating A Culture of Excellence

The story of Cleveland County Schools' middle grades is one of intentional design and collective dedication. From classroom instruction to leadership development, the district's systems reflect a deep commitment to ensuring that every student learns at high levels. By aligning vision with practice, Cleveland County Schools continues to model what it means to cultivate a culture of excellence, one rooted in collaboration, consistency, and care.

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