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Students, Parents, Educators Exchange Ideas on Middle School Reform

*PEF and Hamilton County Schools host
middle school planning retreat*

As Hamilton County's 21 middle schools near the end of their second year of reform work, teams of students, parents, teachers and principals from each middle school will meet to exchange ideas and experiences and focus on continuing to improve instruction at their schools.

Leadership teams, including 8-10 students, parents, faculty members, and principals from each middle school, will hold the Middle Schools for a New Society (MSNS) planning retreat at the Chattanooga on Tuesday, March 25 from 7:45 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. In all, 225 school representatives will compare notes and think about how to move forward on their individual school plans for addressing the needs of 21st century middle school students.

"Every school in Hamilton County has some exceptional teachers," says Ismahen Kangles, Director of Middle Schools for a New Society. "We are working on plans to spread that exceptional skill and knowledge to every teacher in the county."

The meeting will include breakout sessions where "role-alike" representatives from each school will meet as a group. Students will meet to discuss what's working and not working at their schools and improvements they'd like to see; parents will look at differentiated instruction, which is how teachers reach students of different skill levels within a single class; principals and change coaches will exchange information about successful and less successful aspects of the reform work so far; and teachers will discuss networking and how best to exchange ideas about effective teaching practices.

In the afternoon, students will meet in a "world café" to provide insight to principals on questions they have posed. Students will move from table to table

to discuss “appetizer” questions; “entree” questions; “side-dish” questions; and “dessert” questions. They’ll be encouraged to be creative in their thinking, including writing on tablecloths as needed. Afterwards, they will meet with the larger group to share what they learned from this process.

“The leadership teams and their schools have eagerly embraced this work,” says Ismahen Kangles, Director of Middle Schools for a New Society at the Public Education Foundation. “We are seeing a great deal of energy, enthusiasm and creativity in middle schools right now.”

The MSNS retreat is part of a four-year improvement initiative that has been made possible through a partnership between the Public Education Foundation and the Hamilton County Department of Education. The Lyndhurst Foundation and the National Education Association Foundation have provided \$8.5 million in funding to support this work.

The goals are ambitious: not only should every student reach proficiency in math and language, but at least 5% more per year should rate an “advanced” score on the state’s exams in these subjects.

“We’re proud to support middle schools in this work,” says Dan Challener, President of the Public Education Foundation. “Middle schools provide the transition from a strong elementary foundation to a challenging high school environment. Middle Schools for a New Society will provide a crucial link in making Hamilton County a top-notch school system from K-12.”

Hamilton County Superintendent Dr. Jim Scales agrees. “Middle schools have been the missing link in our overall student achievement plans and reform efforts,” he said. “Middle school reform is at the forefront and we expect our students to benefit greatly from this increased collaboration.”

The MSNS planning retreat will be moderated by Jackie Walsh, Lead Consultant for Alabama’s Commission on Quality Teaching. Ms. Walsh did similar work for Hamilton County’s high school reform initiative.

The Public Education Foundation is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to improving student achievement in Hamilton County. PEF works in partnership with the Hamilton County Department of Education to design and implement research-based innovations and provide ongoing professional development for teachers and school leaders.

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