

# Mayhem in the Middle: Why We Should Shift to K–8

Cheri Pierson Yecke

Available at: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr06/vol63/num07/Mayhem-in-the-Middle@-Why-We-Should-Shift-to-K%E2%80%938.aspx>

Middle schools are increasingly switching to the K–8 model to improve student achievement. Ten strategies can help ease the transition.

In early 2005, the National Governors Association convened an education summit to address the dismal state of U.S. high schools. Nearly one-third of students eventually drop out, which annually costs the U.S. economy an estimated \$16 billion in lost productivity. Although well intended, the solutions that many governors offered at the summit misidentified the cause of “high school” problems. Abundant evidence indicates that the seeds that produce high school failure are sown in grades 5–8 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). In far too many cases, U.S. middle schools are where student academic achievement goes to die.

As measured by international comparisons, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the achievement of U.S. students begins to plummet in middle school. And, as countless teachers and parents will attest, contemporary middle schools have become places where discipline is often lax and intermittent. Too many educators view middle school as an environment in which little is expected of students, either academically or behaviorally, on the assumption that students must place self-discipline and high academic expectations on hold until the hormone-driven storms of early adolescence have passed.

But if surging hormones truly drive middle school students' supposed lack of capacity to focus on academics, why does this phenomenon strike only in the United States? Other countries don't experience a similar decline in achievement at these grades. Something else is driving this precipitous drop in achievement. I propose that it is the anti-intellectualism inherent to the middle school concept.

To understand, we need to differentiate between *middle schools* and the *middle school concept*. Middle schools are simply organizational groupings, generally containing grades 6, 7, and 8. The middle school concept, on the other hand, is the belief that the purpose of these schools is to create students who are imbued with egalitarian principles; who are in touch with their political, social, and psychological selves; and who eschew competition and individual achievement to focus on identity development and perceived societal needs (Gallagher, 1991; Sicola, 1990; Toepfer, 1992). Although many U.S. middle schools are flourishing with strong and rigorous academic programs, the middle school concept—the notion that middle schools should be havens of socialization and not academies of knowledge—has wrought havoc on the intellectual development of many middle school students.

As any reform-minded superintendent or courageous middle school principal may tell you, reclaiming middle-grades schools from the clutches of the middle school concept has not been an easy task. In fact, this goal has been so elusive in some districts that the only alternative has been to eliminate the middle school grade configuration altogether, returning instead to the K–8 model.

Several urban school districts, such as Baltimore, Maryland, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, are now abandoning both the middle school concept and middle schools. By 2008, the number of K–8 schools in Philadelphia will have increased from 61 to 130. Baltimore has opened 30 K–8 schools in the last few years. Districts like Brookline, Massachusetts, and Cincinnati, Ohio, are now exclusively K–8. The goal for these districts is the same: to increase academic achievement and create an atmosphere more conducive to learning (Chaker, 2005).

## **Why K–8?**

Although many U.S. educators embraced the middle school concept during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, some educators refused to jump on the bandwagon. As a result, parents, teachers, and administrators at many schools that remained K–8 discovered anecdotally that their students demonstrated fewer behavioral problems and higher academic achievement than many students enrolled in middle schools.

School district leaders in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Baltimore, and Philadelphia wanted to determine whether they could verify these anecdotal observations through research. The studies they undertook convinced them to accelerate a shift to the K–8 model in their districts.

### **The Milwaukee Study**

Researchers in Milwaukee conducted a longitudinal analysis of 924 Milwaukee students who either attended K–8 schools or attended K–6 elementary schools and then proceeded to a middle school for 7th and 8th grade (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). The study controlled for race, ethnicity, teacher-student ratios, and levels of teacher education.

The researchers found that the students in the K–8 schools had higher academic achievement as measured by both grade point averages and standardized test scores, especially in math. These students also participated more in extracurricular activities, demonstrated greater leadership skills, and were less likely to be bullied than those following the elementary/middle school track. The authors concluded that the intimacy of the K–8 environment and the delay of the transition to a new school until students were more mature may have accounted for the discrepancy.

### **The Baltimore Study**

In Baltimore, researchers undertook a longitudinal study of two cohorts of students: 2,464 students who attended K–5 schools and then went on to middle schools, and 407 students who attended K–8 schools (Baltimore City Schools, 2001). After controlling for baseline achievement, the researchers found that the students in the K–8 schools scored much higher than their middle school counterparts on standardized achievement measures in reading, language

arts, and math. The students in the K–8 schools were also more likely to pass the required state tests in math. Further, more than 70 percent of the K–8 students were admitted into Baltimore's most competitive high schools, compared with only 54 percent of students from the middle schools (Baltimore City Schools, 2001).

## **The Philadelphia Study**

Philadelphia carried its examination of the achievement of students progressing through either K–8 or middle schools into high school to determine whether academic gains or losses from either model were sustained over time. After controlling for student background, researchers analyzed achievement data from approximately 40 K–8 schools and 40 middle schools.

The analysis showed that the students in the K–8 schools had higher academic achievement than those in the middle schools and that their academic gains surpassed those of the middle school students in reading and science, with statistically higher gains in math (Offenberg, 2001).

Eleven percent more students from the K–8 schools were accepted into the most challenging high schools. Moreover, once in high school, the grade point averages of students who had attended K–8 schools were higher than those of former middle school students. Offenberg concluded, “As a group, K–8 schools are more effective than middle-grades schools serving similar communities” (2001, p. 28).

The study noted that one factor possibly contributing to these differences is the number of students at a specific grade level. Although a K–8 school and a middle school might have the same total number of students, they are spread over more grades in the K–8 school, reducing the number of students in each grade. Offenberg's report suggests that as the number of students in a given grade increases, performance gains decrease.

## **Ten Strategies for Transition**

I conducted site visits in all three school districts—Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Philadelphia—to see how the K–8 model was working and to gather advice for those interested in making the transition to the K–8 model. I selected one school in each district to visit on the basis of the school's ethnic diversity. The schools serve low-income urban students; each school faces its own demographic challenges. All three schools came to the K–8 model by a different route.

Humboldt Park K–8 School in Milwaukee shifted from K–5 to K–8 a few years ago. Its student population is notably diverse: Approximately 35 percent of students are Hmong, 30 percent are white, 15 percent are Hispanic, and 15 percent are black. Hamilton Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore has been a K–8 school for more than 20 years; its student body is 75 percent black. The Julia de Burgos School in Philadelphia, originally a 6–8 middle school, expanded downward to add grades K–5; its student body is 89 percent Hispanic.

In all three schools, staff and administrators were committed to meeting the needs of underprivileged students and believed that they could best accomplish this in a K–8 setting.

Their advice, along with feedback from students and parents, suggests 10 strategies that can ease the transition to a K–8 model.

### **Strategy 1: Include parents in the process.**

To ensure the success of the K–8 model, parents should participate in all aspects of the planning process. Policy decisions concerning such varied issues as curriculum, dress code, and behavioral expectations call for parental input. The most academically successful school that I visited, Humboldt Park K–8 School in Milwaukee, also has the most active and organized parents. Parents initiated the move to transition Humboldt Park into a charter school because they were concerned that district policies might undermine the school's academic program. This high level of engagement was not a reflection of higher socioeconomic status: 70 percent of students at Humboldt Park come from low-income homes.

### **Strategy 2: Add higher rather than lower grades.**

Incrementally adding higher grades to shift an elementary school to a K–8 school appears to be a smoother process than adding lower grades to a middle school. This approach seems to minimize grade-level imbalances and necessitate fewer building modifications. Faculty members at Humboldt Park unanimously agreed that when adding grades 6, 7, and 8, schools should add only one grade each year. This gives time for students, faculty, support staff, and administration to adjust.

### **Strategy 3: Ensure grade-level balance.**

Attaining demographic balance among the various grade levels should be a priority. Having too many older or younger students means that the needs of the dominant group can drive school policies and set the school tone. For example, one schoolwide policy limited bathroom passes because some of the middle-grades students used them to roam the halls. However, because younger students tend to use the bathroom more frequently than older students do, lower-grades teachers challenged this policy.

If transition logistics require a temporary imbalance, schools should ensure that staff members are aware of the undue weight that the overrepresented grades might bring to a school and remind them that the imbalance is only temporary.

### **Strategy 4: Make 6th grade a transition year.**

Moving from the elementary to the upper-grades section of the school requires students to become familiar with a different location and learn rules that often give them greater freedom. Because this change usually occurs in 6th grade, it would be helpful to provide flexibility as students make the transition. Retaining some elements of the elementary school—such as recess, classroom learning centers, or walking in lines during classroom changes—may help 6th grade function as a bridge between the elementary and middle grades.

### **Strategy 5: Establish a strict transfer policy.**

District officials need to acknowledge the challenges that transfer students bring to schools. Involuntary transfers are harder for schools to deal with and typically occur when the district administration decides to relocate students who have had difficulties elsewhere. Philadelphia wisely handles this issue through an alternative program that accommodates students with the most serious discipline problems. Baltimore has no such program in place, leaving staff members and faculty frustrated as they struggle to balance teaching students who do not have serious behavior problems with rehabilitating those who do.

Voluntary transfers present other challenges. Students who arrive from schools that have less structure and lower academic standards might find the transition to a challenging K–8 setting difficult. Humboldt Park addresses this issue by requiring mandatory after-school lessons to help transfer students catch up. Schools can also provide an opportunity for students to receive remediation in the summer before the school year starts. Either way, schools should establish a policy that helps transfer students adjust to the level of work required.

Twenty-five percent of children in 4th through 8th grade care for themselves regularly either before or after school.

—*America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2005*

### **Strategy 6: Modify facilities.**

A school transitioning into a K–8 structure may need to make certain physical modifications to adapt its facility to students of various ages. For example, elementary schools adding middle grades will need to add computers in the library and include books appropriate for middle-grades students. If the library has limited space, the school may need to create a separate computer lab. The school might also consider adding lockers for older students or building a more advanced science lab. For any newly K–8 school, the cafeteria will most likely require scheduling changes and menu revisions to adapt to an influx of older or younger students. Moreover, making the transition from a middle school to a K–8 school entails creating centers and “nooks” in primary classrooms and modifying restrooms by lowering toilets and sinks.

In addition, designating a separate building wing for the upper grades provides older students with some time on their own and reduces unsupervised interactions with younger students. Humboldt Park in Milwaukee does a good job of this. In contrast, Philadelphia's Julia de Burgos School, which of the three schools observed had the least separation among its students, reported the most challenges with interactions between older and younger students.

### **Strategy 7: Have high expectations for both academics and behavior.**

High academic achievement rarely happens in an undisciplined environment. Of the schools I visited, Baltimore's Hamilton had the most behavior problems. This was also the only school in which student achievement declined in the upper grades. In contrast, Milwaukee's Humboldt

Park had the strictest discipline policy. There, 75 percent of students leave kindergarten reading at the 2nd grade level.

Policies establishing academic and behavioral norms—such as consistent expectations regarding homework or dress code—will set the K–8 school's tone for years to come, and parents should be involved in drafting them. Behavioral expectations don't need to be uniform throughout the school. Schools should provide some flexibility for upper-grades students, giving them greater freedom and responsibility as they prepare to transition to high school. For example, most K–8 schools allow upper-grades students to change classes independently as opposed to walking in lines.

### **Strategy 8: Decide on the academic approach.**

The schools that I visited in Baltimore and Milwaukee organize their upper-grades teachers by academic department. The teachers at Julia de Burgos School in Philadelphia initially sought that structure but now prefer the self-contained approach.

The self-contained model, in which students stay with the same teacher for the core subjects of reading, math, science, and social studies, appears to foster better teacher-student relationships and a more nurturing environment. But it also means that teachers must prepare for four subjects instead of one, and it may force them into unfamiliar fields in which they have received no specialized training. The departmentalized setting, in which each teacher is a specialist in one or more areas, is more likely to produce higher academic achievement but provides fewer opportunities to counsel and mentor students.

It is fairly well established that strong subject-area knowledge in teachers correlates with higher student achievement (Whitehurst, 2002). It is therefore unfortunate that in 2004, half of Philadelphia's middle-level teachers failed exams assessing their content knowledge (Snyder & Mezzacappa, 2004). Although colleges of education might bear some of the blame, these gaps might also reflect a shift away from academics that has characterized much of the middle school movement's troubled history.

U.S. middle-level teachers with subject-specific certificates appear to be a dying breed. In 1980, 80 percent of middle-level teachers held subject-specific certificates, but that number had dropped to 52 percent by 2000 (Clark, Petzko, Lucas, & Valentine, 2001). One study shows that during the 1999–2000 school year, alarming percentages of middle-grades teachers lacked a college major or certification in the areas in which they taught: 58 percent lacked a major or certification in English, 57 percent in science, 69 percent in math, 71 percent in history, and 93 percent in physical science (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Another recent study found that only 22 percent of middle school math teachers surveyed indicated that they had majored in math, and fewer than half had a teaching certificate in that subject (Loveless, 2004).

K–8 planners need to find the right balance. A truly compassionate education cannot allow the desire for a nurturing environment to trump access to a rigorous, well-taught curriculum.

### **Strategy 9: Provide greater access to advanced courses and electives.**

Because the upper grades have fewer students, K–8 schools have difficulty offering advanced subjects—such as foreign language classes or advanced math—that can enrich a curriculum. However, schools should not deny challenging academic opportunities to their students because of their particular grade configuration. One solution is to work collaboratively with other K–8 schools in the district, or even with the local high school, to have itinerant teachers come to the school to offer such classes. This may require some flexibility in scheduling. Another option might involve distance learning.

Above all, students need access to higher levels of math. A study from the U.S. Department of Education found that the academic intensity and quality of a student's high school curriculum were the most important factors in determining whether students completed a bachelor's degree (Adelman, 1999). Students cannot take rigorous courses in high school—especially advanced math courses—if they have not prepared themselves for this challenging work in their middle grades.

### **Strategy 10: Provide greater access to extracurricular opportunities.**

With a larger student body in a given age group, middle schools can offer band, choir, and sports activities to a degree that K–8 schools cannot. However, several K–8 schools working together might field a team or create a band or choir. Schools could also coordinate extracurricular activities after school for all students in grades 6, 7, and 8, regardless of whether they attend a K–8 school or a middle school.

A number of districts—even those on the cutting edge of the K–8 movement—are guilty of lumping K–8 schools with elementary schools in various administrative funding classifications. This practice often rules out funding for extracurricular activities.

## **Moving Forward**

The K–8 model is no silver bullet for middle school reform, but it deserves consideration. In this era of flexible education options, K–8 schools and middle schools can coexist—provided that middle schools embrace standards and accountability.

C. S. Lewis once wrote,

If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. Going back is the quickest way on. (1943)

This summarizes the key strategy for undoing the damage that the middle school concept has done to U.S. education: We must *go back* to find scientifically based research that reveals the strengths or weaknesses of specific education practices, *go back* to proven methodologies, and *go back* to parents and empathetically listen to their concerns.

The key to renewing middle-grades education in the United States is to treat it as education rather than as personal adjustment. That means having high academic standards, a coherent

curriculum, effective instruction, strong leadership, results-based accountability, and sound discipline. That formula has begun to pay off in the primary grades. It can pay off in the middle grades as well.

## References

Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the toolbox: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Baltimore City Schools, Division of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability. (2001). *An examination of K-5, 6-8 versus K-8 grade configurations*. Baltimore: Author.

Chaker, A. M. (2005, April 6). Middle school goes out of fashion. *The Wall Street Journal*.

Clark, D., Petzko, V., Lucas, S., & Valentine, J. (2001, Nov. 1). *Research findings from the 2000 National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools*. Paper presented at the National Middle School Association annual conference, Washington, DC.

Gallagher, J. J. (1991). Education reform, values, and gifted students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 35(1).

Lewis, C. S. (2001). *Mere Christianity* (Book One, Chapter Five) (Rev. ed.). New York: HarperCollins.

Loveless, T. (2004, November). *The 2004 Brown Center Report on American Education: How well are American students learning?* Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2000). *Mathematics and science education in the eighth grade: Findings from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study*. Washington, DC: Author.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *Qualifications of the public school teacher workforce: Prevalence of out-of-field teaching 1987-88 to 1999-2000*. Washington, DC: Author.

Offenberg, R. M. (2001). The efficacy of Philadelphia's K-to-8 schools compared to middle grades schools. *Middle School Journal*, 32(4), 23-29.

Sicola, P. K. (1990). Where do gifted students fit? *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 14(1).

Simmons, R., & Blyth, D. (1987). *Moving into adolescence: The impact of pubertal change and school context*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Snyder, S., & Mezzacappa, D. (2004, March 23). Teachers come up short in testing. *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Toepfer, C. F. (1992). Middle level school curriculum: Defining the elusive. In J. L. Irvin (Ed.), *Transforming middle-level education: Perspectives and possibilities*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Whitehurst, G. J. (2002, March 5). *Research on teacher preparation and professional development*. Speech presented at the White House Conference on Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers. Available:

[www.ed.gov/admins/tchrqual/learn/preparingteachersconference/whitehurst.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/tchrqual/learn/preparingteachersconference/whitehurst.html)

**Cheri Pierson Yecke** ([chancellor@fldoe.org](mailto:chancellor@fldoe.org)) is Chancellor of K–12 Public Schools for the Florida Department of Education and author of two studies on the need for middle school reform: *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America's Middle Schools* (Praeger, 2003) and *Mayhem in the Middle: How Middle Schools Have Failed America—And How to Make Them Work* (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2005).