



The Case for the Elemiddle School

🏠 **Middle Matters** » Winter 2003 » page(s) 1-3

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The question that has plagued educational policy makers for years is how to group students too mature for elementary school and too immature for secondary school to maximize their potential for success in school. Should they be in a junior high school housing grades 7-8 or 7-9, a middle school housing grades 5-8 or 6-8, a high school housing grades 7-12, or in some configuration more aligned to the elementary school? While the necessarily equivocal answer is "It depends," a growing body of research indicates that a specific type of K-8 school, what I call the "elemiddle" school, may be the best answer (Hough 1995).

For the past 40 years or more, scholars have noted and attempted to explain the changing demographics relative to school grade-span configurations. But merely counting the number of schools that have changed their grade-span configurations doesn't tell us anything about what program changes are taking place within those schools, nor in which type of school young adolescents are learning best. Too many schools have changed their grade configurations to 6-8 and called themselves middle schools without substantively changing their programs, policies, practices, instructional processes, or curricula.

A recent study of research conducted over the last dozen years indicates that the key question regarding the impact of middle-grades education on student achievement has yet to be addressed on the national level (Hough *et al.* 2003 in process). Although much of the current body of information is a product of self-reporting by individual schools and school districts, data often document improved student achievement for middle-grades students attending K-8 elemiddle schools. In addition, research indicates a significantly higher level of middle-level programs, policies, and practices in K-8 than in 6-8 schools (Hough 1991a, 1991b, 1995, 1997, and 2003 in process).

"We've Been Doing That for Years"

You can't effectively create change and implement middle-level programs if the people doing the work don't believe in them. The most effective curriculum is the one teachers buy into. Because the middle school philosophy is more closely aligned with the child-centered philosophy of the elementary school than with the subject-centered approach of the high school, middle school practices are more acceptable and easier to achieve with elementary-trained teachers.

For example, many career elementary school teachers when they first learn of middle school programs, policies, and practices are quick to say, "We've been doing that for years." Integrating subject matter, as well as learner outcomes and objectives, into thematic units; promoting intramural sports; advising students; exploring nontraditional subject matter; and meeting with other teachers on a regular basis to plan and present instruction to a common group of students are all promising middle school practices that are familiar to many elementary school teachers.

Perhaps it is easier to implement these middle school concepts in K-8 elemiddle schools because the climate for teaching both children and adolescents is already in place. A program that maintains stability of student attrition across grade levels and sustains a nurturing environment can help students make the transition from childhood to young adolescence at various stages between grades 4 and 8. Addressing this transition without changing schools is a significant strength of the K-8 elemiddle school. More opportunities exist to match developmentally appropriate instruction with a critical mass of students across grade levels.

Another strength of the K-8 schools is the ease with which some middle-level practices can be implemented. For example, many eighth graders not reading at grade level have shown improvement as a result of having tutored a student in a lower grade, say the fourth or fifth. This type of cross-age tutoring can be easily accomplished and supervised when the students are in the same K-8 building.

Teacher teaming across grade levels is another middle-level concept that most teachers in K-8 schools tend to accept. In fact, having a common time to plan together for instruction is considered a perk by many teachers, who have very little planning time during the school day in a traditional elementary school.

What Principals Need to Know

Principals of K-8 and middle schools would be well advised to learn, understand, and apply middle-level education programs, practices, and policies for students ages 10 to 14. Also, make sure that your staffs, parents, and communities understand what the middle school concept actually entails. Whenever possible, make every effort to hire teachers who have been trained to teach young adolescents. Those holding elementary and/or middle school teaching certification should be given priority over those holding secondary school certification.

Principals need to understand that young adolescents mature at vastly different rates and at different stages between grades 4 and 10. Some fourth- and fifth-grade students may be ready for departmentalized classrooms while some sixth and seventh graders are not. Transitioning students from classrooms designed for children to those designed for young adolescents cannot be done effectively by treating all students as though they develop physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively at the same rates. Principals should not only recognize and appreciate the stages of human growth and development that constitute young adolescence, they should also take the lead in helping students, parents, and teachers celebrate it.

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