Middle Grades Configurations and Small Schools

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Abstract
A literature debate currently exists as to whether early adolescents should be schooled in K-8 configurations or whether they should attend middle schools. The issue is especially important for smaller school districts housed on a single campus. The authors discuss the views of the two sides in this paper and suggest a third, less contentious alternative that melds the best of both worlds: small, truly K-12 schools in which the concepts previously promulgated only by middle school advocates are in effect for the benefit of all students.

Introduction
Research agrees that young adolescents have common needs at this stage of their development that schools need to meet. These are: 1) competence and achievement, 2) opportunities for exploration and self definition, 3) creative expression, 4) physical activity, 5) positive social interaction with adults and peers, 6) structure and clear limits, and 7) meaningful participation in family, school, and community activities (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003).

Citing unfulfilled promises of the middle school concept and the need to increase student achievement at the middle level (Lewis, 2006; Scherer, 2006), many school districts are involved in configuration renovations that range from tentative exploration to wholesale remodeling of their elementary and middle level school structure.

Middle school advocates claim that only middle schools and their teachers are equipped to address the students’ needs at this age (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006), while K-8 advocates argue that elementary teachers already address these needs by focusing on building a nurturing school environment (Gootman, 2006a &b). This discussion leaves small schools unable to decide which school structure will work best for their young adolescents. Many small schools are facing the pressures of meeting the mandates of No Child Left Behind Act and Adequate Yearly Progress and are being forced into consolidation. These schools are now trying to determine if keeping their early adolescents in separate buildings or configuring their grades into K-8 and 9-12 will better meet their adolescents’ developmental needs. Unfortunately, the recent research is divided on the matter as it will be illustrated in this paper. The authors will present the argument of the two schools of thought and discuss the implications of these views for small schools.

Literature Review
The concept of middle schools as a replacement for junior high schools made its debut in the 1950s, gradually rose in popularity over the next three decades to a peak in the 1980s, and began to fall from favor in the 1990s (Weiss and Kipnes, 2006). According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in the executive summary of its guide entitled This We Believe, there are fourteen essential characteristics of effective middle schools (2003). The characteristics highlight facets important to the culture of middle-level schools such as a faculty that is highly-trained and dedicated to working...
with young adolescents; an atmosphere that is inviting, safe, positive, and that promotes a collegial and collaborative attitude among both faculty and students; and a vision for growth and advocacy of youth that is shared by faculty, parents, and students. Further, the NMSA stresses the need for middle level schools to provide a curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, and integrated; instruction and assessment strategies that are diverse and that promote high quality and meaningful learning; and a structure that supports students with multiple types and levels of guidance and policies and programs that “foster health, wellness, and safety” (NMSA, 2003, p. 2). These guidelines, although newly revised, have been the cornerstone of the NMSA message and, indeed, the entire middle school concept since the 1960s.

Hough’s research bore out what many teachers of young adolescents already knew intuitively—that schools configured either in a K-8 or 6-8 format were more likely to employ more child-centered teaching and learning practices than schools that followed the more common 7-12 or 7-9 configuration. This type of teaching, in which children are encouraged to construct knowledge for themselves, is more conducive to students taking ownership of and accountability for their own learning, according to Hough (1995).

However, the impression that students in middle schools were somehow not doing as well as their counterparts led to an upheaval of middle level school structures in large districts throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Lewis, 2006; Weiss and Kipnes, 2006). New York City, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Cleveland have all considered a return to a K-8 configuration, citing concerns that middle schools, because they seemingly overemphasize the more supportive and child-centered aspects of the middle school concept, do not offer the rigor necessary for middle-level students to achieve academically at appropriate levels (Weiss and Kipnes, 2006).

Several other researchers concur that students in middle schools are left behind by their peers in K-8 schools. Offenberg (2001) found that K-8 students in similar communities as their counterparts in middle schools achieved significantly higher on measures of reading, math, and science. Similar results in students’ achievement in language arts, reading, and math were reported by Connolly, Yakimowski-Srebnick, and Russo in the Baltimore City schools (2002). Further, Alspaugh (2001) found, in his study of rural Missouri districts, that students who attended middle schools rather than K-8 schools lost ground academically not only in the transition from K-5 elementary to middle school, but also in the transition from eighth to ninth grade, as compared to their peers in K-8 and 9-12 configurations. He also noted a significant increase in the dropout rate in students who had attended middle schools.

Many educators are calling for a reduction of the number of school transitions by combining grades k-8 in one building (Gootman 2007 a, b; Zemike, 2007). Gootman (2007a) argue that early adolescents should not be subjected to a transition at this critical age as they face emotional, physical, and social challenges but rather should remain in K-8 settings where they can act as role models for younger students. However, she also cautions that there is no solid evidence that students’ academics decline in middle schools as compared to K-8 schools.

Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor (2007) report that students, who attend middle schools are more than twice as likely to be disciplined when compared to their counterparts in K-8 school settings. They contribute this phenomenon to the middle
school emphasis on academics and discipline rather than building relationships. The authors of this paper argue that the increase of discipline referrals could be attributed to students’ lack of familiarity with the new school environment and expectations, which students housed in K-8 settings don’t have to face. This contention is supported by the same Cook et al. (2007) research that demonstrates a decline of discipline referrals in the seventh grade in middle schools (6-8 grades).

Nearly all the preceding researchers also noted that the middle schools they studied were larger and more ethnically diverse than the neighborhood-based K-8 schools involved in their research. In fact, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) found that the only significant difference between middle schools and K-8 schools was that the latter felt less threatened by classmates, once the researchers had controlled for ethnic diversity and the difference in school size between the two types of schools. This is one of the rallying cries of those who carry the middle school banner. Because, in some communities, one middle school may be fed by several elementary schools from different and often socio-economically diverse neighborhoods, the middle schools tend to be larger, thus presumably more difficult to manage and less supportive and intimate for individual students (Beane and Lipka, 2006).

Galletti lists advantages of smaller elementary and middle-level schools (i.e. 300 to 400 students) over larger ones that include higher academic achievement, improved school climate, higher student participation, more highly developed sense of belonging, and more comfortable student-teacher relationships (1999). Schools that include students in all grades through the eighth grade also tend to have smaller class sizes and teachers who are properly certified to teach the level of students to which they are assigned, something that has been a stumbling block for middle schools throughout their existence (Patton, 2005). Even more interesting is that Offenberg (2001), the researcher who obtained student achievement results favoring K-8 schools, suggested that the number of students in each grade in a school may be a stronger contributor to student success than the overall size of the actual school.

Middle school advocates point out that many of the middle schools being studied are not actually middle schools at all. Many are junior high schools that are misnamed; others simply cannot be classified as being organized around any specific conceptual framework (Elmore, 2000; Hough, 2005). Hough makes the distinction between “bona fide” middle schools and schools that simply have the word “middle” on the signs above their doors. He also has coined the term elmiddle to describe “only those schools configured with continuous grade spans that begin with kindergarten or pre-kindergarten and end after the 8th grade in which the upper grade spans are implementing middle-level best practices” (Hough, 2005, para. 5). What are middle-level best practices, according to Hough? He says, “... only those 6-8s and 5-8s that are fully [italics added] implementing the middle school philosophy as outlined in the National Middle School Association’s 2003 position paper, “This We Believe . . .” should be labeled middle schools” (Hough, 2005, para. 5).

Finally, after concluding that both types of middle-level configurations have both advantages and drawbacks, Beane and Lipka (2006) review characteristics of effective middle schools reminiscent of those promoted by the NMSA. They conclude: Interestingly, virtually all iterations of the middle school concept recognize that high-quality schools for young adolescents exist within a variety of grade configurations, including 5-8, 6-8, 7-8, K-8, 7-12, and K-12. And, obviously, most of the components
of the middle school concept are appropriate for any grade level. Why, then, would advocates of the concept specifically tie it to the middle grades?

Implications
Why, indeed? If, while reading all the research in the preceding section, one does not almost immediately have the epiphany that the concepts promulgated by the NMSA and other middle school advocates are all undeniably hallmarks of high quality schooling regardless of the student’s age. The reader needs to consider the strong possibility that research that negatively reflects on the middle school concept is due more to the misunderstanding and improper implementation of the concept than to the concept itself.

Hough, the dean of the college of education at Missouri State University in Springfield, has given us the concept of the elemiddle school (2005). With it, the best aspects of the middle school concept are married to the ideas that young children and especially young adolescents should be schooled in an environment that is socially and academically inviting to them and that they should remain together in a cohort for as long as possible to reap the advantages of an education based on rigorous, developmentally-appropriate, meaningful, and collaborative work.

This is all especially significant when one considers the dynamics of many small school districts in rural America. If the district is housed, as many are, in a K-12 arrangement on one campus, certain artificial grade span delineations may simply evolve of their own volition. We must ask ourselves whether those boundaries exist for the best reasons and if they are based on a student-centered rationale or, rather, on ideas that should be considered foreign to the school milieu. In fact, should not the middle school concept be applied to all levels in a school district? And should it not especially be applied across the board when each and every student in the district is housed on one campus?

The authors argue that schools should not be overly concerned with the structure of schools and grades configurations but rather focus on creating a nurturing, safe environment that caters to students’ needs. Also, schools should train all their teachers to recognize their students’ diversity and needs and how to address them in order to better educate them.

Conclusion
For many years, elementary and middle schools have been criticized for being learner-centered, while lacking rigor and focus on academics (Lewis, 2006), while secondary schools have been criticized for being subject-centered with little regard to students’ developmental needs (Hough, 2005). Such rigid dichotomy is proving to be detrimental to our students. The authors argue that small schools have the golden opportunity to train their faculty to blend the two approaches in order to meet the needs of our future generations.

The authors contend that we should embrace Hough’s elemiddle concept and enhance it to include all levels from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. An “elemiddlehigh” school is not a stretch conceptually, but might be difficult to implement due to existing political and social structures. However, if educators are committed to making changes to improve schools for students, they have to re-examine their own practices. Teachers realize that the primary goal is successful learning for all students and they strive to achieve that goal. Schools leaders should provide the vision and stewardship for their teachers to build student-centered schools that cater to students’ developmental needs while promoting their academic achievement.

A solution that is achievement-oriented while remaining true to the established principles of effectively schooling middle level students is sorely needed. Because the issue is so politically and socially charged in the larger districts where the furor began,
this original goal may have been lost in the chaos of research that is largely inconclusive. Even though the research is proving to be inconclusive, it clearly agrees on the impact of small schools and class size on students' achievement (Bean & Lipka, 2006; Galletti, 1999).

This leads the authors to contend that schools should concentrate their efforts on reducing class size and training their teachers to create effective and nurturing learning environment for their students regardless of grade configurations. It is hoped that smaller schools can, by virtue of their more compact natures, implement strategies within a grade level configuration that is designed to do what schools are supposed to do—promote success in learning for all their children in a safe, effective environment.

References


