



# Mayhem in the Middle

How middle schools have failed  
America—and how to make them work

Cheri Pierson Yecke

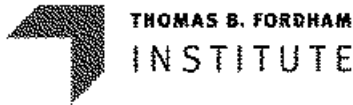
Foreword by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Compact  
Guides to  
Education  
Solutions

# Mayhem in the Middle

How middle schools have failed  
America—and how to make them work

By Cheri Pierson Yecke  
Foreword by Chester E. Finn, Jr.



1627 K Street, N.W.  
Suite 600  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
(202) 223-5452  
(202) 223-9226 Fax  
[www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net)

September 2005

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publications, and directs action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in Dayton, Ohio. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Further information can be found by surfing to [www.edexcellence.net/institute](http://www.edexcellence.net/institute) or writing us at

1627 K Street, N.W.  
Suite 600  
Washington, D.C. 20006.

This report is available in full on the web site; additional copies can be ordered at [www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/order.cfm](http://www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/order.cfm) or by calling 410-634-2400. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

Cover photo: Corbis, all rights reserved  
Design by Katherine Rybak Torres, all rights reserved  
Printed by District Creative Printing, Upper Marlboro, Maryland

## Executive Summary

**M**iddle schoolism (*definition*): An approach to educating children in the middle grades (usually grades 5-8), popularized in the latter half of the 20th century, that contributed to a precipitous decline in academic achievement among American early adolescents.

Many middle schools are on the right path, but those that embraced middle schoolism have lost their way. *It is time for a thorough reform of middle grade education, including a new focus on high standards, discipline, and accountability for student achievement.*

Academic achievement plummets between the fourth and eighth grades, the middle school years:

- In 1995, American fourth-graders scored at the international average on the international TIMSS assessment of math. Four years later, the same students were *22 points below* the international average. In science, U.S. fourth graders scored 28 points above the international average in 1995, but in 1999 their eighth grade scores had dropped to nine points below average—a *37-point decline*.

- The 2003 Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) found that U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 24th out of the 29 countries in both math literacy and problem solving.

- RAND reports that U.S. middle school students manifest depression, disengagement, fear for physical safety, a desire to drop out, and boredom with schoolwork at rates that exceed those of every industrial nation except Israel.

- Middle schools are overrepresented on the list of failing schools as defined by the No Child Left Behind act: In 2004-05, they comprised only 14 percent of all Title I schools, but 37 percent of Title I schools identified for improvement.

- Although 13-year olds' NAEP math scores have risen slightly since 1990, their reading scores in 2004 remained flat—at the same inadequate level that caused the U.S. to be declared a "nation at risk"

in 1989.

Middle schoolism is based on pseudo-scientific theories and downplays academic achievement:

- The middle school movement advances the notion that academic achievement should take a back seat to such ends as self-exploration, socialization, and group learning.

- Middle schoolism proponents view the purpose of schools as putting children in touch with their political, social, and psychological selves, eschewing competition and individual achievement, and focusing on identity development and societal needs.

- Middle schoolism is partially based on the now-discredited theory of "brain periodization," which holds that "the brain virtually ceases to grow" in children ages 12 to 14 and that teaching complex material during that period will have damaging effects.

Schools, states, and districts are returning to the K-8 model of education, the dominant model in the U.S. well into the 20th century. Though some middle schools are high-performing, research from three cities—Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Baltimore—indicates that the traditional K-8 model may produce better outcomes:

- Students in K-8 Milwaukee schools had higher academic achievement, especially in math. They also had higher levels of participation in extra-curricular activities, demonstrated greater leadership skills, and were less likely to be victimized than those in the elementary/middle school setting.

- In Philadelphia, analysts showed that students in K-8 schools had higher academic achievement than pupils in middle schools. Their academic *gains* also surpassed those of middle school students in reading, science and math. Once in high school, their grade point average was higher than that of their peers who had attended middle schools.

- Baltimore researchers found that students in K-8 schools scored

significantly higher than their middle school counterparts on standardized achievement measures in reading, language arts, and math. Students in K-8 schools were also more likely to pass statewide math tests.

### **How should districts or schools considering a transition to a K-8 model proceed?**

The author offers several suggestions for planning and implementing the transition to a K-8 model, and then for sustaining success. These include:

- Involving parents, establishing high academic and behavioral expectations, treating sixth grade as a "transition" year, and adapting the school facility as needed.

- When transitioning from an elementary to K-8 school, school planners should add grades incrementally, seek demographic balance among grade levels, establish a strict transfer policy (especially involuntary transfers of students with disciplinary problems), and decide whether instruction will be self-contained or departmentalized.

- Once a K-8 school is up and running, strategies to ensure that it functions well include continued parent involvement and the enforcement of high standards; controlled interactions between older and younger students; and taking advantage of continuity of pupil attendance.

- To sustain academic and behavioral success, K-8 schools should strive to provide older student access to advanced courses and electives, as well as extra-curricular opportunities.

**Middle schools can be high-performing educational institutions**, and the author describes two such examples. The essential problem with "middle schoolism" is not grade configuration but edu-

cational ideology. However a school is structured, in the era of standards and accountability, it must focus first and foremost on students' acquisition of essential academic skills and knowledge.

*That means "middle schoolism" must end.*

## Contents

<b>Foreword</b> by <i>Chester E. Finn, Jr.</i> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>Preface</b> by <i>Cheri Pierson Yecke</i> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: How We Got Muddled: History of the Middle School</b> .....	<b>5</b>
The Life-Adjustment Movement	
Middle Schools Emerge	
Brain Periodization	
1989: The Pivotal Year	
Storm Clouds Gather	
<b>Chapter Two: K-8 Reconsidered</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Studies in Three Cities	
Case Studies	
<b>Chapter Three: Hamilton Middle-Elementary Schools, Baltimore</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Humboldt Park K-8 School, Milwaukee</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Julia De Burgos School, Philadelphia</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations</b> ..	<b>48</b>
Keeping Middle Schools, Rejecting Middle Schoolism	
Planning for the Future	
Implementation: Making It Work	
Sustaining Success	
Areas of Future Study	
Moving Forward	
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	<b>63</b>





## Foreword

**Chester E. Finn, Jr.**

If ever an education fad was a vivid illustration of dreadful timing, reaching its intellectual and political pinnacle just as lightning struck that very mountaintop from afar, that was “middle schoolism.” The key year turned out to be 1989, when the middle school bible, an influential Carnegie-backed report named *Turning Points*, was published just as the governors and the first President Bush were gathering in Charlottesville to place the United States squarely on the side of the standards-based reform that is antithetical to the central message of this educational religion.

In the ensuing decade and a half, two trends have caught the middle grades of U.S. education in a punishing and perplexing pincer. From one direction comes the National Middle School Association (NMSA) and its allies and acolytes, flying the banner of *Turning Points* and arguing that the middle grades are not a time for academic learning so much as social adjustment, individual growth, coping with early adolescence, and looking out for the needs of the “whole child.” That is the essence of “middle schoolism” as set forth in this report by Cheri Pierson Yecke.

From the other direction marches standards-based reform in general, the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) in particular, and a parade of evidence that the middle grades are where U.S. student achievement begins its fateful plunge and where a growing number of other nations begin to outpace us in the contest for a well-education population, skilled workforce, and long-term prosperity.

That the middle grades *can* be a time of strong academic growth and marked achievement in core skills and knowledge is demonstrated by lots of effective schools, including more than a few called “middle” schools. Though youngsters between the ages of ten and fifteen can be ornery and exasperating, they can also learn lots of math and history, plenty of literature and science, and an amplitude of art and music. They can also develop sound character, admirable values, good habits (with occasional slippage), positive attitudes (also with lapses), and excellent social skills. There’s nothing about kids this age that undermines their capacity to learn and there’s nothing about grades

five, six, seven, and eight that precludes them from being places of powerful teaching and intent learning of a solid core curriculum. All this can even happen in places called “middle schools.” Grade configuration is not the key issue.

Rather, the key issue is the educational philosophy, assumptions, goals, and expectations that drive a school that spans the middle grades and those who lead and teach in it. If they worship at the altar of middle-schoolism, their theology tells them not to dwell overmuch on academics; other things matter more. If instead they subscribe to standards and results-based accountability, they will pay greater heed to their students’ long-term prospects than their short-run adjustment and will concentrate their efforts on the academic gains that play much the greatest role in those youngster’s prospects over time: in whether they complete high school and how much they know and can do upon graduation, in whether and where they attend college and how well prepared they are to succeed there.

The unabashed goal of this report is to show why middle-schoolism deserves to be consigned to history’s dustbin—another education fad that, however well intended, now needs to be retired and forgotten.

One way to do that is to dedicate middle schools to the goals of high standards, academic achievement, and tough-minded accountability. The other way—a counter-trend observable in many cities—is to revive the K-8 school, wherein middle-grade pupils study under the same roof as elementary-grade youngsters. The number of such public schools—clumsily dubbed “elemiddle” by some—rose 17 percent since 1994 (versus a 9 percent increase in pure elementary schools), although there are still only about 5,000 of them (versus 65,000 public elementary schools). Under Paul Vallas’s leadership, Philadelphia is making the switch. “Sixth grade test scores were always our lowest,” Vallas explained, and something had to change. Of course, Catholic schools have been organized this way for eons.

It’s no panacea, to be sure. In the pages that follow, Yecke unpacks and illustrates many of the challenges that come with K-8 schools as well as complexities inherent in converting any school from one configuration to another. But there’s some evidence that, overall, K-8 works better, that its results are stronger, and that its advantages outweigh its drawbacks.

Still, our main point isn't grade structure. It is educational philosophy and effectiveness. And on that front there's been evidence for years that U.S. middle schools haven't been pulling their weight—and that something needs to change. Generalizing, one can say that American students do reasonably well in grades K-4; that their performance falters in grades 5-8; and that (with splendid exceptions) it is dismal in high school.

The middle grades are where the slope of the achievement curve alters for the worse, where trouble sets in and disappointment is born. One need only examine the 2004 long-term trend results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress for the latest evidence that, despite some gains in math, the overall performance of thirteen-year-olds in general remains woefully deficient.

Yet this is not a new insight. By 1998, less than a decade after *Turning Points* emerged, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) termed the middle grades "Education's Weak Link." The phrase "middle school reform" began to gain currency, no longer referring to the progressivist reforms touted by proponents of middle-schoolism but to the need to reform the middle school movement itself to align it more effectively with the "excellence movement," as many called the dominant strand in U.S. education in the years after *A Nation at Risk*.

In 2000, Hayes Mizell of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, as astute a participant/observer as the middle school movement ever had, declared, "There is disquiet in the middle school community." Here is how he characterized that disquiet:

Owing largely to the visibility that state accountability and assessment systems have given to performance on standardized tests, serious questions have arisen about students' achievement levels and the capacity of middle schools to challenge students academically. . . . Too many middle level teachers continue to buy into the myth that young adolescents are so distracted by their social, emotional, physical, and psychological development that they have no interest in learning, and that

there is no point in challenging them. . . . There are also too many middle school teachers who lack the necessary subject matter knowledge necessary to engage students in higher levels of learning and who demonstrate little interest in their own professional development to acquire the knowledge and skills they need. Finally, many families regard middle schools as unfocused, dangerous places where their children are not safe. . . . There is, then, a rising tide of doubt about the viability and effectiveness of middle schools.

Five years—and tons more evidence—later, that’s pretty much Dr. Yecke’s view, too. She is superbly qualified to tackle this topic, having served, among other things, as a senior federal Education Department official, as Secretary of Education in Virginia—a state widely praised for the quality of its academic standards—and, for a brief but astonishingly fruitful period, as Commissioner of Education in Minnesota. She also authored the fine 2003 book, *The War Against Excellence*, which simultaneously exposed the shortcomings of U.S. middle-school education and the country’s strange and dysfunctional animus toward “giftedness.” (Information about that book can be found at <http://www.greenwood.com/books/BookDetail.asp?sku=C8116>.) As expected, her book was condemned by reviewers for the National Middle School Association, which branded it “part of a larger attack sponsored by ultra-right and ultra-conservative groups on colleges of education, NCATE, and the like,” thus sparing itself the unpleasant task of addressing Yecke’s substantive arguments and voluminous evidence.

That may well happen again. Devotees of middle-schoolism don’t easily surrender their faith, any more than the partisans of a hundred other discredited education fads and nostrums have abandoned theirs, no matter what the results may show about their efficacy. (Consider, for example, the dogged durability of “whole language” reading methods in the face of ample scientific proof that they don’t work.) The central problem with education fads and nostrums, after all, is that they are driven by faith, hope, and ideology, not by evidence of

effectiveness.

So be it. Our goal is not to convert the faithful. Rather, it is to explain to open-minded policy makers and community leaders, people who care about student achievement and are pragmatic about its attainment, that the middle grades can and must be places of serious learning—but that such learning is not likely to happen if those who preside over them are unyielding believers in this discredited theology. If middle-grade education in the U.S. is to be reformed, the civilians who are ultimately in charge of it will have to take control.

Many people are to be appreciated for helping to bring about the fine volume that follows. To begin, we must thank the many teachers, administrators, and school leaders at the K-8 schools profiled herein, who gave generously of their time and expertise to answer Cheri's questions and offer their thoughts on the challenges and opportunities of K-8 schools. Several generous donors underwrote the publication of this report, which was prepared by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute team (especially departing research director Justin Torres and research assistant Michael Connolly, to both of whom my thanks for a job well done). But finally, I must of course recognize and thank Cheri Yecke herself, an outstanding educator and policy maker whose passion for children learning is rivaled only by her impatience with nonsense and cant.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publications, and directs action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in Dayton, Ohio. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Further information can be found by surfing to [www.edexcellence.net/institute](http://www.edexcellence.net/institute) or writing us at 1627 K Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20006. This report is available in full on the web site; additional copies can be ordered at [www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/order.cfm](http://www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/order.cfm) or by calling 410-634-2400. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

*Chester E. Finn, Jr.*  
*President*  
*Washington, D.C.*  
*August 2005*



## Preface

**Cheri Pierson Yecke**

**M**iddle-schoolism is dead. May it rest in peace. Let me be clear: Middle schools—that is, educational institutions that house students in grades 6, 7, 8, and sometimes 5—are alive and kicking. This grade level organization, while challenging in some respects, is capable of producing wonderful academic achievement, as we see in such stellar middle schools as the **KIPP** academies.

It is the middle school *concept*, the notion that middle schools should be havens of socialization and not academies of knowledge, that has met its Waterloo—though the fervent partisans of middle schoolism do not yet realize it.

This report joins a swelling chorus of individuals and organizations that are calling for advocates of the middle school “concept” to wave the white flag, surrender peacefully, and go home. It will cover the history of the middle school movement, the growth and ultimate ascendancy of the middle school “concept,” and how a number of communities have successfully, and at no great cost, transitioned back to the traditional K-8 model.

Like Japanese soldiers who hid in Pacific island jungles for decades after World War II, unaware or unwilling to believe that the Allies had triumphed, proponents of radical middle schoolism are fighting a war that has long been lost.

## **A Tale of Two Theories**

Ironically, the radical middle school “concept” reached its zenith in 1989, the same year as the Charlottesville education summit convened by President George H.W. Bush set in motion a reform sequence that would doom that very concept. This summit famously launched the nationwide standards and accountability movement that put an unprecedented premium on student academic achievement, the very thing that radical middle schools activists spurned.

As a result of this summit, educators and policy makers across the land began to establish higher and more rigorous expectations for students and new systems for holding schools accountable for their performance. Simultaneously, partisans of the radical middle



school concept became fixated on non-academic goals. Driven by the belief that old-fashioned cognitive skills and knowledge should be de-emphasized, they urged middle schools to focus instead on such concerns as self-esteem, mental health, identity development, interpersonal relations, egalitarian principles, and social justice.

They were relentless. Rather than submit to the reality that America now demands schools with strong academic achievement and that such achievement is essential not merely to secure national prosperity but also the engaged citizenship that undergirds the republic, radical middle-school devotees continue their efforts with fervent zeal.

As recently as 1999, one of the leaders of middle schoolism, James Beane, mocked those who wanted middle schools to avow a traditional educational mission and questioned their loyalty to the cause:

Some middle school advocates already seem to have chosen a new direction, calling now for “academic excellence” as the slogan for a new phase of the middle school movement. . . . Are some “advocates” suddenly getting cold feet?<sup>1</sup>

His solution was not to change strategies or tactics, not to concede that the public wants schools that emphasize academics, but to declare that middle schools are “under siege,” and that it is time for their advocates “to supplement their important talk about young people with some thought about what kinds of social purposes they think they should promote.”<sup>2</sup>

The rhetoric had not changed two years later when Beane addressed the National Middle School Association, speaking vehemently against standards-based reform and repeatedly lamenting the “betrayal” by middle school educators who dare to support that strategy for academic renewal. He concluded by saying that, without a concerted effort to reverse the present course, “I would claim that the middle school concept is essentially destroyed.”<sup>3</sup>

Note the ring of desperation. I interpret it as the death rattle of middle schoolism. Even among that movement’s foot soldiers, the

realization was dawning that this concept's days were numbered. One by one, most have surrendered to the call for strong and challenging academic standards.

Yet holdouts remain, recalling the moment, in 1974, when Japanese officer Hiroo Onoda was discovered on an island in the Philippines where he had lived in hiding for nearly three decades, believing that the war was still in progress. He refused to give up until his former commanding officer was flown in to convince him that World War II was over.

While some may assert that there is no shame in defeat, supporting a lost cause far beyond its natural termination makes others wonder if you have been paying attention or if belief has triumphed over reality.

As James Beane said, "I would claim that the middle school concept is essentially destroyed." Supporters of the middle school "concept" need to realize that the war is indeed over, by the admission of their own leaders. It is time to admit defeat, lay down arms, and consign middle schoolism and the faddish theories and approaches it entails to the dustbin of educational history. Then they can and should return to the urgent and noble work of equipping their young charges with the knowledge and skills that they need, and that the nation expects.



## Introduction

In early 2005, the National Governors Association announced a new initiative to address the latest crisis in American education: the state of our nation's high schools. Across the country, nearly one-third of American students eventually drop out, which annually costs the U.S. economy an estimated \$16 billion in lost productivity. Governors were joined in this announcement by Microsoft founder Bill Gates, a longtime crusader for high school reform, who has contributed more than \$1 billion toward this effort in the past decade.<sup>4</sup>

Although well intended, the governors' solutions misidentify the cause of "high school" problems. Abundant evidence indicates that the seeds that produce high school failure are sown in grades 5-8. In far too many cases, American middle schools are where student academic achievement goes to die.

On international comparisons such as the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS),<sup>5</sup> middle school is where the achievement of American children begins to plummet relative to that of children in other developed nations. Recent long-term trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) buttress this finding: Although 13-year olds' NAEP math scores have risen slightly since 1990, their reading scores in 2004 remained flat—at the same inadequate level that caused the U.S. to be declared a "nation at risk" in 1989.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the most disquieting finding of the 2004 NAEP report was that the relatively high achievement of America's nine-year-olds begins to level off and then plummet in the middle school years. These data would not surprise countless teachers and parents, who will attest that contemporary middle schools have become a place where good behavior and discipline are often lax and intermittent. Too many educators see middle schools as an environment where little is expected of students either academically or behaviorally, on the assumption that self-discipline and high academic expectations must be placed on hold until the storms of early adolescence have passed. The sad reality is that by the time those storms have dissipated, many students are too far behind to pick up the pace and meet current state academic requirements, much less the challenging expectations of fed-

eral laws such as No Child Left Behind.

The American middle school made its debut in the early 1960s as a modification of the traditional junior high school, which housed grades 7, 8, and sometimes 9 in an environment designed to prepare students for the greater rigors of high school. In the 1980s, however, middle schools were hijacked by those who saw them not as places for systematic teaching and purposeful learning but, in the words of one prominent middle school activist, as “the focus of social experimentation.”<sup>7</sup> The middle school movement of the late 1980s had as its ideological antecedent the notion that academics should take a back seat to such progressive pedagogical techniques as self-exploration, socialization, and group learning. Filling this content void is a disproportionate regard for student self-esteem and identity development, education in egalitarian principles, and attention to students’ physical, sexual, social, and mental health. And the result? A precipitous decline in academic achievement.

It is critical to differentiate between *middle schools* and the *middle school concept*. Middle schools are merely organizational groupings, generally containing grades 6, 7, and 8, though many combinations of grade spans go by the name “middle school.” The middle school “concept,” on the other hand, is the belief that the purpose of schools is to create children imbued with egalitarian principles, in touch with their political, social, and psychological selves, who eschew competition and individual achievement and instead focus on identity development and perceived societal needs.

In retrospect, the middle school “concept,” born as an egalitarian dream of activists such as education professor Paul George—who saw schools as “vehicles for [the] movement toward increased justice and equality in society”<sup>8</sup>—was doomed from the start. Emerging almost simultaneously with the standards and accountability movement that was touched off by publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 and propelled by the 1989 Charlottesville summit, the two reforms could not coexist. One focused on academic excellence and rigorous standards, while the other downplayed academics and sought to use class time for quite different endeavors. Once parents, taxpayers, business leaders, elected officials, and conscientious teachers saw the truth behind the “concept” and its devastating results, they rose

in angry protest.

The challenge for any community is to ensure that its schools share its priorities. When lines of communication are open and trust is maintained, this is not an issue. But when parents believe that one thing is happening in the schools and then discover, to their dismay, that the reality is very different from their expectation, the stage is set for a conflict.

This report chronicles the history of the middle school movement, including its radicalization, then presents other options, such as the K-8 model, for communities to consider for students in the middle grades.



## 1

## HOW WE GOT MUDDLED: HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the most common A-grade organization for American schools was an elementary school containing the first eight grades and a high school containing the last four: the 8/4 model. But concerns were expressed about upper-level elementary students spending too much time in a repetitious curriculum, culminating in an 1894 recommendation from the Committee of Ten on Secondary Studies to shift to a 6/6 structure. That meant moving students in grade 7 and 8 from elementary into high school.<sup>9</sup>

**Middle level Grade Configurations, 1971-2000**

	5 to 8	6 to 8	7 to 8	7 to 9	Other	Total
1971	772	1,662	2,450	4,711	850	10,445
% of 1971 Total	7	16	24	45	8	100
1981	1,024	3,070	2,628	4,004	1,500	12,226
% of 1981 Total	8	25	22	33	12	100
1991	1,330	4,838	2,902	2,298	727	12,095
% of 1991 Total	11	40	24	19	6	100
2000	1,379	8,371	2,390	689	1,278	14,107
% of 2000 Total	10	58	17	5	9	100
1971-2000 Change	607	6,709	-60	-4,022	428	3,662
1971-2000 % Change	79	404	-2	-85	50	35



Other proposals were floated between 1908 and 1911, including a modified proposal to split the upper half of the 6/6 organization into junior and senior levels (6/3/3). This suggestion reflected an interest in allowing students to receive six years of schooling at the elementary level and an additional three more years of instruction, since many students were not going to graduate from high school—and in that era were not expected to. The first “junior high schools” fitting this organizational design appeared in 1909.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after World War I, the United States witnessed a dramatic rise in elementary school enrollments, providing a pragmatic reason to move toward the junior high model. It was more efficient to shift several grades out of elementary schools, preserving the neighborhood school for the youngest students, while constructing more centralized and less proximate buildings for older students. This demographic trend continued for several decades.<sup>11</sup>

The new junior high schools generally included grades 7, 8, and 9, and resembled high schools in both organization and academic orientation. The inclusion of ninth grade maintained a link with the high school that was strong enough to drive the curriculum of junior high schools, so they differed little from senior high schools.

By the 1920s, educators were wrestling with how to address the differing academic abilities and divergent interests that they noted in their students. One junior high proponent, Leonard Koos, proposed that junior high schools should provide “differentiation of work through partially variable curricula, groups moving at differing rates, promotion by subject, permitting brighter pupils to carry more courses, and supervised study.”<sup>12</sup>

Had such a proposal been faithfully implemented, schools for children in the middle grades might look very different from what they do now. However, other forces were at play.

## **The Life-Adjustment Movement**

An educational phenomenon known as the “Life-Adjustment Movement” gained a strong following among American educators in the 1940s and ’50s. This philosophy of schooling stressed socialization and downplayed academic rigor. It has been described by the famed historian Richard Hofstadter as a way to justify a less rigor-

ous curriculum in the name of pragmatism and equity.<sup>13</sup>

Its proponents were fervent. Charles A. Prosser, a pillar of the vocational education movement, praised attendees at the 1947 national life-adjustment conference with unabashed intensity: “Never in the history of education has there been such a meeting as this. . . . What you have planned is worth fighting for—it is worth dying for. . . . God bless you all.”<sup>14</sup> Similar fervor can be seen in the remarks of another life-adjustment enthusiast, a principal who addressed the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in 1951. In a presentation called “How can the junior high curriculum be improved?” he said:

When we come to the realization that not every child has to read, figure, write, and spell . . . that many of them either cannot or will not master these chores, then we shall be on the road to improving the junior high curriculum. Between this day and that a lot of selling must take place. But it’s coming. . . . If and when we are able to convince a few folks that mastery of reading, writing, and arithmetic is not the one road leading to happy, successful living, the next step is to cut down on the amount of time and attention devoted to these areas in general junior-high courses.<sup>15</sup>

The life-adjustment movement resonated with those who were dissatisfied with the academic emphasis of junior high schools, resulting in a call for reform of those institutions with the 1961 publication of *The Junior High School We Need*.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, the Cornell Junior High School Conference in 1963 reiterated that call.<sup>17</sup> But what emerged was not a reform of the junior high school but an entirely new grade level organization.

## **Middle Schools Emerge**

By the early 1960s, the first middle schools began to emerge, a change that involved moving ninth grade up to high school and moving at least one grade (sixth and sometimes fifth) out of the elementary school and into the new middle school.<sup>18</sup> This configuration

removed a direct high school influence from the middle level and introduced younger children into it.

Yet mere organizational restructuring did not satisfy those middle school advocates who subscribed to the life-adjustment philosophy. A growing disconnect between their vision and the reality of middle school practice declined in the early 1970s. A number of these advocates pushed to use middle schools as the means to attain non-academic ends by advocating initiatives unique to the middle school.

A speech by C.L. Midjaas, an early advocate for less academic middle schools, was titled “The Middle School: An Opportunity for Humanized Education.” It evoked the life-adjustment movement and sought to create a new vision for the middle school:

The program in the middle school would most probably include limited instruction in what could be termed the learning skills—the abilities to read, write [and] perform arithmetic computation. . . . Students should be as free as possible to come and go, to study or not study, to take this course or that course. . . . The curriculum would likely emphasize the development of healthy relationships between people, encouraging the social development of the individual while helping each human being better understand his own needs. . . . Learner achievement would most probably be evaluated in ways which avoided comparing one student to another . . . [and] the curriculum would likely discourage any emphasis upon working independently.<sup>19</sup>

Midjaas was either prescient or very influential, as the evolving middle school “concept” ultimately reflected much of his vision. A 1975 publication by the influential Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) shows that others concurrently shared his vision:

It appears that many middle schools have adopted the educational programs and practices of junior highs,

thus not successfully achieving the middle school concept. The junior high school, although its philosophy from the time of its inception in the early 1900s was almost identical to the present espoused philosophy of the middle school, has long been criticized for being too much a “true” junior to the senior high school. Many alleged characteristics of the senior high have “contaminated” the junior high—a departmentalized subject-matter curriculum, interscholastic athletics . . . . And now it appears that many middle schools have continued these same sins . . . . Thus, it should come as no surprise that the only real difference between many middle schools and junior highs have been in name and grade organization.<sup>20</sup>

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) was formed in 1973. Its first convention was held the following year, but other than asserting that the middle school should be very different from the traditional junior high school, the movement struggled to establish its identity and creed. For more than fifteen years, it lacked a clear, unified vision. However, issues were emerging that set the stage for a revolutionary identity change in 1989.

## **Brain Periodization**

A “scientific theory” known as “brain periodization” or the “plateau learning theory” was introduced to the education world in the late 1970s. It claimed that brain growth in children ages 12 to 14 reaches a plateau, at which time “the brain virtually ceases to grow,” and that teaching complex material during that period will have damaging effects on children.<sup>21</sup> Thus, middle school advocates now had a “scientific” reason to dilute the rigor of the academic offerings at the middle school.

According to biophysics professor Herman Epstein, and education professor Conrad Toepfer:

With virtually no increase of brain size and mass in the large majority of 12- to 14-year-olds, there is no

growth in the capacity of the brain to handle more complex thinking processes usually introduced in grades seven and eight. This continued demand for the youngster's brain to handle increasingly complex input, which he or she cannot comprehend during this period, may result in the rejection of these inputs and the possible development of negative neural networks to dissipate the energy of the inputs. Thus, it is possible that even when the subsequent growth of the brain between the ages of 14 and 16 could support the development of more complex cognitive skills, the untold numbers of individuals who have developed such negative networks have been so "turned off" that they literally can no longer develop novel cognitive skills.

Epstein and Toepfer presented an intimidating argument when they followed their claims with this solemn pronouncement: "These biological data provide a validated neuroscience framework in which educators can have confidence."<sup>22</sup> This theory was formally introduced to the middle school community at the 1979 NMSA conference and, bizarre as it may have been, did much to drive the watering-down of the middle school curricula.

Although the theory was swiftly discredited by other scientists, surveys indicate that, as recently as 1995, many educators remained committed to it.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of whether their commitment is based on ideology or convenience, it led to low-challenge academic expectations and low achievement in the middle grades.

### **1989: The Pivotal Year**

A professor of education at the University of Florida, Paul George, finally focused the movement by forcefully defining the middle school "concept." In a 1988 article, appropriately subtitled *Which Way the Middle School?*, he said that genuine middle schools must have goals beyond academics and should be "the focus of social experimentation, the vehicle for movement toward increased justice and equality in the society as a whole."<sup>24</sup> His article constituted an urgent

call to action for middle school activists, a zealous warning that “if the middle school concept is not firmly in place . . . [middle schools] may disappear and the concept with them...We are in a race between the middle school concept and all the threats that imperil its existence.”<sup>25</sup>

In this article, Professor George set the stage for a radical shift in the goals of the middle school movement. He differentiates the *middle school* from the *middle school concept* and demanded that the latter be set “firmly in place.” He warned that the middle school concept was imperiled and indicated that activists must rise to defend and preserve it.

What were those threats to the middle school concept? The biggest by far was the standards and accountability movement, developing concurrently with the middle school movement. In 1983, publication of *A Nation at Risk* triggered this reform strategy by alerting the American public to the sharp decline in U.S. academic performance, warning, “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.”<sup>26</sup> This report stimulated attention to the achievement of American students, triggering a national push for excellence. In 1989, a governors’ summit was convened by President George H.W. Bush in Charlottesville, Virginia, to set the course for this national movement with the goal of developing rigorous academic standards and holding schools accountable for their attainment.

By happenstance, 1989 was also the year that the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development released an influential report titled *Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21st Century*. It echoed the concerns raised by Paul George and declared that nearly all early adolescents are dysfunctional. Phrases such as “grave situation” and “serious jeopardy”<sup>27</sup> were used to describe the situation of middle grade students, and both traditional education and an apathetic public were blamed:

As currently organized, these middle grades constitute an arena of casualties—damaging to both student and teachers.

By age 15, millions of American youth are at risk. . . . These youth are among the estimated 7 million young people—one in four adolescents—who are extremely vulnerable to multiple high-risk behaviors and school failure.

As the number of youth left behind grows . . . we must face the specter of a divided society. . . . We face an America at odds with itself.

All sectors of society must be mobilized to build a national consensus to make transformation of middle grade schools a reality.<sup>28</sup>

The publication of *Turning Points* was a pivotal moment in the history of the middle school movement. Those who subscribed to the life-adjustment and anti-academic philosophies were given the instrument with which to implement their vision. An external organization possessing vast credibility had identified a “crisis” and set an agenda for dealing with it. Leaders of the middle school movement jumped at the opportunity. It was, in fact, just what their lagging movement had long needed.

Undaunted by the cry for higher academic standards reverberating from the Charlottesville summit, proponents of the radical middle school concept forged ahead. Rather than focusing on academics, people like John Lounsbury, a prominent advocate of middle schoolism, took up *Turning Points*’ call for radical change:

Public education now, whether we like it or not, has new responsibilities—life building, character forming, personal growth responsibilities—that cannot be effectively carried out in a system and by a curriculum that was designed for transmitting prescribed knowledge. . . . The misguided and timid reform efforts of the past decades have obviously not gotten to the heart of the matter.. “Dare the school build a new social

order?” George Counts asked in 1932. It was a proper question then and it is a proper one now. I, for one, believe the school does have a social and political responsibility to work toward change for the better in our larger society. [And I recognize] the key role that only the middle school can play in building better human beings.<sup>29</sup>

During the 1970s and '80s, the NMSA had searched for a unique identity; brain periodization was embraced by many middle school proponents; and advocates of the life-adjustment movement still hoped to make their mark. The advocacy of Paul George and the publication of *Turning Points* provided a point of convergence for these ideas, emboldening the effort to implement “the middle school concept.” The impact of *Turning Points* cannot be overemphasized. References to it appear again and again in middle school literature, and it remained a popular topic at NMSA annual conferences a decade after its publication.<sup>30</sup>

## **Storm Clouds Gather**

It did not take long, however, for the broader public to ask whether this new organizational structure and its reigning philosophy were sound. The rumblings began anecdotally, with parents seeing a decline in motivation and easing of academic rigor. According to one frustrated parent:

Phillip, my 12-year-old son, is an excellent student who wants to learn. Unfortunately, he is being de-motivated by a school system that publicly proclaims its academic standards but privately has put a higher priority on social concerns. . . . Academic accomplishment is no longer paramount. Instead, the curriculum has softened and playtime activity frequently passes for teaching. . . . The unintended results of this absence of academic rigor are diminished student achievement and motivation.<sup>31</sup>

This was not a lone voice. A survey by two middle school advo-



cates found that many parents shared the same concerns. A mere 13 percent of parents believed that the program in their child's middle school was "rigorous and challenging." 83 percent either disagreed or were unsure.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, a Public Agenda survey conducted in 1996 found that more than half of all teachers believed that low academic standards and expectations were "very serious" or "somewhat serious" problems. An even greater percentage of the general public agreed.<sup>33</sup> Another Public Agenda study found that three-fourths of students admitted that they could perform better in school if they tried, suggesting that they were not being adequately challenged.<sup>34</sup>

The dismal performance of American middle school students on an international achievement test, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, now known as the Trends in International Math and Science Study), further fueled this discontent. In 1995, U.S. fourth graders scored above the international average in science but by eighth grade their performance started to fall behind. Eighth grade students from 16 other countries registered higher performance, and for nine this difference was statistically significant. In math, our fourth grade students were at the international average, but by eighth grade, students in 27 other countries scored higher than U.S. students, with statistically significant differences in twenty of these countries. Worse still, by twelfth grade, American students were among the lowest performing students in both subjects, with only Cyprus and South Africa scoring lower. And contrary to the claims of some, this is not a case of average U.S. students being compared to only the top students in other nations.<sup>35</sup>

The results were sobering indeed. A policy brief issued by the U.S. Department of Education declared: "U.S. students don't start out behind; they fall behind."<sup>36</sup> Dr. William Schmidt of Michigan State University, the U.S. research coordinator for the study, called the findings "just devastating results. There's no other way to cast them." He continued: "I believe that one of the single most important policy implications of the TIMSS study is this precipitous decline in our international ranking from fourth to eighth grade."<sup>37</sup>

It was not long before these disappointing levels of international

achievement, coupled with parental frustration, prompted public doubts about the middle school “concept.” In early 1998, *Education Week* ran a special section titled “Muddle in the Middle” that stated:

Thirty years after districts began shifting away from junior versions of high school, the middle school model has come under attack for supplanting academic rigor with a focus on students’ social, emotional, and physical needs.<sup>38</sup>

That same year, *School Board News* ran an article titled “School Leaders, Researchers, Re-examining Middle School Reform” that noted similar concerns:

Has the middle-school concept gone too far in catering to the social and emotional developmental needs of young adolescents at the expense of academic performance? That’s exactly what some education experts and school leaders are charging.<sup>39</sup>

*Teacher Magazine* was even blunter: “After more than 30 years, the middle school reform movement has done little to improve the education young teenagers get.”<sup>40</sup>

In the midst of these rumblings, officials decided to repeat the TIMSS exam in 1999 to see whether the decline in performance at the middle grades was an aberration. It was called the TIMSS-R (TIMSS-Repeat), and eighth grade students in 38 countries participated. It was thought that perhaps curriculum changes from the early 1990s had produced positive results in 1995 for fourth graders only, and that their relatively strong achievement would be sustained as they moved into eighth grade. Unfortunately, the results showed otherwise.<sup>41</sup>

Although the 1995 math scores of U.S. fourth graders were at the international average, by 1999 their scores as eighth graders were 22 points below the international average.<sup>42</sup> The results in science were more dramatic still. In 1995, U.S. fourth graders scored 28 points above the international average, but in 1999, the scores of eighth graders had dropped to nine points below the international

average—a *full 37-point decline*.<sup>43</sup> Regarding this study, project manager Patrick Gonzales engaged in understatement: “What I think we can hypothesize from these results is that the pace of learning in some of the other nations is faster between fourth and eighth grades than it is in the United States.”<sup>44</sup>

Newer results are no more comforting. The Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) released the findings of its 2003 assessments last year, and found that U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 24th out of the 29 countries studied in both mathematics literacy and problem solving.<sup>45</sup> Tragically, American students were outperformed by almost every other developed country.

Other studies also implicate the contemporary middle school for its failure to deliver. In 2003, this author published *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America’s Middle Schools*, noting that many contemporary middle schools overemphasize such practices as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and heterogeneous grouping, and thus drastically lower expectations and achievement for their pupils, especially those who possess high academic ability.<sup>46</sup>

In a comprehensive 2004 study that examined two decades of U.S. and international education of the early adolescent, the RAND Corporation concluded:

. . . [A] separate middle school has become the norm more because of societal and demographic pressures than because of scientific evidence supporting the need for a separate school for young teens. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that separate schools and the transitions they require can cause problems that negatively affect students’ developmental and academic progress.<sup>47</sup>

RAND analysts found that U.S. middle school students report depression, disengagement, fear for physical safety, a desire to drop out, and boredom with schoolwork at rates that exceed those of every industrial nation except Israel.

Finally, long-term trend data from the 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, released just weeks before publi-

cation of this report, seems finally to have convinced many observers that middle schools are in serious trouble. In reading, the relatively high achievement of America's nine-year-olds in 1999 was not sustained through middle school: average reading scale scores for 13-year-olds did not budge from 1999-2004, and remain essentially where they were in 1989. (Math scores did rise modestly.) And most disturbingly, by the time students get through high schools achievement has actually fallen. Clearly, the middle school is simply not sustaining the achievement of America's elementary schools—and the fall-off accelerates over time.<sup>48</sup>

The question posed in 1988—"Which Way the Middle School?"—needs to be rephrased for the twenty-first century: "Which Way the Middle School *Concept*?" The answer is clear: This is the age of results-based accountability in education, and organizational structures that fail to emphasize achievement and discipline will wither. Yet the ostrich-like leaders of the NMSA chose to ignore or belittle the influence of the standards and accountability movement. For example, the preeminent educational trend of our time, "Standards and Assessments" was a stand-alone category at NMSA conferences for only one year, in 2000. Furthermore, only a meager number of sessions on standards were presented at NMSA conferences from 1998-2001, and most of them denigrated the standards movement. In one 2000 session, Paul George intoned sarcastically:

Raise your students' achievement test scores—or else!  
Middle school educators are pressured as never before  
to respond to strident, threatening demands for  
increased academic achievement. What can school,  
classroom, and district leaders do?<sup>49</sup>

Proponents of the middle school "concept" regularly ridicule what Toepfer calls "the contemporary infatuation with improving performance in academic achievement."<sup>50</sup> But the fact is that middle schools that shun standards, accountability, and academic rigor will find themselves trusted with the education of children by fewer and fewer parents, taxpayers, and voters. It is past time for the implementation of commonsense reforms and providing the community

with public schools that focus on priorities truly set by the public.

Yet middle school advocates won't quit. In 2001, Paul George admitted that middle schools were not producing adequate academic performance. However, instead of calling for their reform and redirection, he made this startling admission: after years of imposing this "concept" upon a generation of children, there is only anecdotal—not empirical—evidence that it boosts academic achievement:

The full application and implementation of the middle school concept is likely to lead many students to the highest academic achievement they can reach. *We don't have the evidence to support that*—we need to get beyond the experience of individuals who are leaders and others. We need that kind of evidence (*emphasis added*).<sup>51</sup>

Multiple forces are at play as parents demand freedom to make educational choices for their children. Both standards and accountability as well as school diversity and choice are in the ascendancy. Both powerful education reform strategies push in the direction of high-quality curriculum that focuses on academic growth. The middle school concept runs directly counter to these movements. It is small wonder that communities across America are seeking alternatives.

## 2

### K-8 Reconsidered

The best way to defeat radical middle schoolism is to uproot the anti-academic mindset that drives it. Yes, middle-school grade configurations *can* work—so long as expectations are high and students and teachers are held accountable for real academic performance. But some other institutional models have shown promise in raising the academic achievement of early adolescents. Chief among them is the traditional K-8 structure, a mainstay of American education until the late 20th century, and still the preferred way of organizing high-achieving private school systems, such as U.S. Catholic schools.

Parents, along with reform-minded educators and administrators, have largely driven this increasing trend away from the middle schools “concept.” The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported on the existence of this phenomenon in an article titled “Middle School Goes Out of Fashion.”<sup>52</sup> They report that districts such as Baltimore and Philadelphia are abandoning both the middle school “concept” and middle schools, moving quickly to the K-8 model. By 2008, the number of K-8 schools in Philadelphia will increase from 61 to 130, and Baltimore has opened thirty K-8 schools in the last few years. Then there are districts like Brookline, Massachusetts, and Cincinnati, Ohio, which are now exclusively K-8 districts.

These cities, and others like them, are part of a growing trend that “have turned their backs on middle schools,” opting instead for neighborhood K-8 schools.<sup>53</sup> The goal for all these districts is the same: to increase academic achievement and create an atmosphere more conducive to learning and discipline.

The rest of this report reviews some of the virtues and challenges of the K-8 approach to early adolescent education—not because academic achievement can only be found in these schools, and not because it is *always* found in them, but because their resurgence in such places as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Milwaukee might con-

tain lessons for other school systems that are wrestling with how to strengthen the education of 12- to 14-year-olds.

## Studies in Three Cities

Even as many American educators embraced middle schoolism, some schools refused to jump on the bandwagon. Others swiftly retreated from the middle school “concept” after seeing its negative effects, in some cases reverting to the K-8 model. Sometimes, this embrace of the K-8 structure was not driven by academic considerations but by parents fighting for neighborhood schools. Over time, however, evidence suggesting positive outcomes from K-8 configurations began to catch the attention of analysts and district officials. Students in K-8 schools often showed fewer behavioral problems and achieved at higher levels than pupils enrolled in middle schools.

School district leaders and analysts in Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Philadelphia wanted to determine whether these anecdotal observations could be scientifically verified. The studies they undertook convinced them to accelerate a shift to the K-8 model in their districts, and led administrators in other cities to take notice.

### *The Milwaukee Study*<sup>54</sup>

Researchers in Milwaukee conducted a longitudinal analysis using 924 students who either attended K-8 schools or K-6 elementary and 7-8 middle schools in that city. The data were controlled for race, ethnicity, teacher-pupil ratios, and levels of teacher education.

Researchers Roberta Simmons and Dale Blyth found that students in K-8 schools had higher academic achievement, as measured by both grade point averages and standardized test scores, especially in math. These students also had higher levels of participation in extra-curricular activities, demonstrated greater leadership skills, and were less likely to be victimized than those in the elementary/middle school setting.

They concluded that the intimacy of the K-8 environment and delaying the transition to a new school until students were more mature may have caused the improvements.

### *The Philadelphia Study*<sup>55</sup>

Philadelphia analysts examined not only the achievement of students in K-8 and middle schools, but carried the analysis into high school to determine if academic gains or losses from either model were sustained. Achievement data from 40 to 43 K-8 schools and 37 to 42 middle schools were analyzed after controlling for students' backgrounds.

The analysis showed that students in K-8 schools had higher academic achievement than pupils in middle schools. In addition, their academic *gains* surpassed those of middle school students in reading and science, with statistically higher gains in math.

High school admission in Philadelphia is competitive, and the percentage of students from K-8 schools accepted into the most challenging high schools was eleven percent higher than for those who attended middle schools. Again, this finding was not an artifact of either socio-economic status or race. Furthermore, once in high school, the grade point average of K-8 alumni was higher than that of middle school students.

The author, Robert Offenber, senior policy researcher for Philadelphia Public Schools, concluded: "Every experiment yielded statistically significant evidence and non-significant trends showing that, as a group, K-8 schools are more effective than middle grades schools serving similar communities."<sup>56</sup> He noted that one component contributing to these differences may be the number of students at a specific grade level. While a K-8 school and a middle school might have the same *total* number of students, in the K-8 school they are spread over nine grades, reducing the number of students per grade. This report suggests that, as the number of students in a single grade increased, performance gains decreased.

*The Baltimore Study*<sup>57</sup>

In Baltimore, researchers undertook a longitudinal study of two cohorts of students: 2,464 students who attended K-5 schools followed by middle schools, and 407 students who attended K-8 schools.

They found that, after controlling for baseline achievement, students in K-8 schools scored significantly higher than their middle school counterparts on standardized achievement measures in reading, language arts, and math, and these findings were statistically



significant. Students in K-8 schools were also more likely to pass the required state tests in math.

Seventy percent of K-8 students were admitted into Baltimore's most competitive high schools compared to only 54 percent of students from middle schools.

## **Case Studies**

As communities consider returning to the K-8 model, many questions arise. The three case studies that follow illustrate the answers to some of them.

Educators, parents, and students in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia tell how they came to embrace the K-8 model, the challenges of making the switch, and what they have concluded from the experience to date.

Each school has a unique story to tell and, as we shall see, not all such stories are entirely happy, because grade configuration is not the only element affecting a school's success. While all three serve poor urban children, each school faces its own demographic challenges and came to the K-8 model by a different route. The student body at Hamilton Elementary-Middle School in Baltimore is 75 percent black, and the school has been a K-8 school for more than twenty years. Humboldt Park K-8 School in Milwaukee shifted from K-5 to K-8 a few years ago. Its pupil population is notably diverse: 35 percent Hmong, 30 percent Caucasian, 15 percent Latino, and 15 percent black. The Julia de Burgos School in Philadelphia was a middle school with grades 6-8 that expanded downward to add grades K-5. Its students are 89 percent Hispanic.

One current runs through all these stories: the sincere desire of staff and administrators to meet the needs of underprivileged children, and their conclusion that this is better accomplished in a K-8 setting than in a middle school.

# 3

## **HAMILTON ELEMENTARY-MIDDLE SCHOOL, BALTIMORE**

**H**amilton Elementary-Middle School is located in a residential area in northeast Baltimore. A stately, three-story brick building, it was built in 1925 and underwent renovations about ten years ago. Its corridors are clean, uncluttered, and decorated with student work. The main office was staffed with friendly personnel who clearly were familiar with all the students and parents in their school.

In the 1970s, enrollment dropped below 200 students and the school was slated to close. However, parents who valued the presence of a neighborhood school rallied to keep it open and lobbied to add grades 6, 7, and 8 to increase enrollment. Hamilton now has 670 students, of whom more than half receive free or reduced-price lunches. Principal Tony Barnes has led the school for the last 15 years.

Hamilton is one of four Baltimore schools that has been K-8 for more than 20 years. They were originally called “extended elementaries,” where each teacher at each grade level taught all classes in a self-contained setting. Over time, however, they transitioned into departmentalized instruction in grades 6 to 8. These students have double periods of math and reading each day and a single period for science or social studies. Students wear uniforms (a burgundy top and khaki pants), and the principal’s office is well stocked with donations of these items from local businesses and community members.

### **Discipline and Behavior**

Barnes and his team agree that the behavior and discipline in the K-8 setting is better than in middle schools. While teachers who had previously taught in elementary schools and transferred to Hamilton saw no difference, those who had worked in middle schools were unanimous in their support of the K-8 model. Upon transferring to Hamilton, one teacher commented that “it was like entering another

er world.” Another noted that “behavior is entirely different here.”

Though the middle grades are housed together in one wing of the building, the elementary school mentality governs throughout. Students are escorted to classes by their teachers. “This means that our students get more supervision than they would have under the middle school model,” Barnes explained. “A few years ago, there was a rash of fires in area middle schools that occurred during the day in the school restrooms, but we were never [affected]. Our kids are supervised so they are not roaming the halls.”

Teachers note that the school’s relative smallness fosters better behavior and a sense of community. One explains that “Everybody knows everybody else. This gives us better oversight of our students.” As another teacher notes, younger students are seen as a positive influence: “I tell my students that they have a responsibility to set an example for the younger students. They take it seriously. Some of them have little siblings here, and they want their little brothers and sisters to be better than what they are.”

## **Length of Time in the Building**

The presence of a child’s previous teachers provides extra care when a child starts to struggle. A kindergarten teacher noted that she and her colleagues can easily intervene when former students develop problems in the upper grades, calling this “instant communication.” She commented: “We can get them back on track without a lot of drama. There’s no need for a suspension or expulsion when all I need to do is walk down the hall and tell them I expect better of them.” Sometimes it is the child who does the walking, such as when they are sent down to the pre-kindergarten teacher for a pep talk. According to one teacher: “The embarrassment of ‘going back to kindergarten’ is an incentive for some kids to get back on track.”

## **Sexual Activity**

Although staff members agreed that there is somewhat less sexual activity at this school than at neighboring middle schools, they expressed alarm at the increase in sexual behavior they have noticed in their older students over the last few years. According to one teacher, students “see it in their community, they see it on TV—this

hip-hop culture glamorizes sex but never shows the consequences.”

## **Transfer Students**

Teachers were unanimous that their greatest challenge is integrating students who transfer into the school in the higher grades. Hamilton formerly required its students to begin by fifth grade in order to attend grades 6, 7, and 8, a policy that grew out of the observation that older transfer students had problems adapting to new academic and behavioral expectations. Unfortunately, this policy was suspended by the district office, and since then transfer students have been a frequent challenge.

“It used to be a privilege to attend the middle grades here,” said one teacher. “Now anyone can transfer in at any time, and it’s frustrating for the new kids and distracting—or worse—for our longtime students.” Teachers described transfer students as children who are accustomed to far less structure and lower behavioral and academic expectations. As a result, they tend to be disruptive, defiant, and prone to exhibit “extreme behaviors.” According to one teacher: “Of any ten kids who transfer in, only one or two make it. We try, but most of the time we can’t overcome what’s already been ingrained in them.”

Discussions with students who had been at the school fewer than two years confirmed the teachers’ views. They talked about the difficult time they have adjusting to their new school. They are defiant toward policies that provide structure, such as wearing uniforms and walking in lines, and prefer “freedom in the hallways.” Students who had been in this school from the elementary grades took the uniform requirement for granted and accepted the degree of supervision without complaint.

While teachers expressed frustration over the inability of new students to adjust to the greater structure in this school, they also expressed grave concerns about the negative influence on long-time students. One eighth grade teacher who has been at Hamilton for 32 years noted, “Good kids are influenced by the new kids who have terrible behavior. It makes our work harder. We have to try and convert the new kids while keeping the other kids in line. The kids who haven’t been at this school seem to have no respect for authority and

no respect for their parents. They arrive here and it's already ingrained in them that they can do whatever they want to do."

Another teacher agreed: "We've never seen so many children who just don't care whether they get an education. We've tried everything."

Children transferring in are evenly divided between those whose parents choose to remove them from underperforming schools as a part of the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) provisions, and children with discipline problems who have been removed from other schools and are transferred to Hamilton by the district office. Many perceived that the many transfer students resulting from the NCLB provisions arrive because of Hamilton's solid academic reputation, and that the transfer of troubled children is due in part to the school's reputation and in part to its proximity to the public bus line, which helps facilitate transportation for youngsters from other parts of the city.

Whatever the reason for the transfers, teachers feel that the challenges these students bring could be ameliorated if they transferred in by grades 3 or 4. One teacher said: "If we can get them when they are still quite young, they have a chance of fitting in and learning our expectations—both academic expectations and behavioral ones."

## Achievement

Students at Hamilton consistently score above the district average in both reading and math, but achievement begins to lag after fourth grade (with the exception of grade 7 reading and grade 6 math). Teachers attribute this decline, in part, to the influx of transfer students into the upper grades.

### 2004 Reading Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient on State Test Hamilton Elementary-Middle School

Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8	
School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District
66.7	54.6	87.0	60.5	68.7	49.9	59.7	43.5	71.6	42.5	57.3	42.4

Source: Standard & Poor's analysis: [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com).

**2004 Math**  
**Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient on State Test**  
**Hamilton Elementary-Middle School**

Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8	
School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District
78.8	54.2	57.9	47.6	52.3	43.8	72.4	19.8	38.7	17.9	28.1	19.0

Source: Standard & Poor's analysis: [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com).

The faltering achievement in the upper grades appears to be part of a statewide trend that educators are preparing to address. In 2005, more than three-quarters of Maryland students in grades 3 and 4 scored at the proficient or advanced levels on state assessments of reading and math, but just 52 percent of eighth graders scored at that level.<sup>58</sup> Declines at the middle level were seen even in upscale districts such as Montgomery County. According to Freida Lacey, that district's deputy superintendent, "We're taking a close look at middle schools across the board."<sup>59</sup> Since this K-8 school in Baltimore is experiencing the same decline in achievement at the upper grades, it is clear that the K-8 grade level organization alone is insufficient to assure student achievement.

### **Cross-grade Interactions**

Teachers wistfully recalled the days when older students had more interaction with the younger children. In years past, one said, "a lot of buddy reading took place, along with shared art activities and shared lunch times." In addition, older students would sometimes be called upon to go down to the lower grades and counsel students with attendance or behavior problems. However, those activities had to be scaled back considerably as the number of older transfer students increased, and some took to harassing or bullying the younger students. Said Principal Barnes, "It wasn't many kids, but even one act of intimidation toward the younger students is one too many."

Teachers hope the school will someday be able to return to this sort of cross-grade interaction. According to one lower-grade teacher: "Most of the older kids were such good role models. I hope

the day comes when we can see more of them again.”

### **Limited Options**

Teachers noted that the biggest shortcoming of the K-8 model is its inability to provide as wide an array of choices as the local middle school. These choices include both curricular opportunities, such as algebra and foreign languages, and extra-curricular activities, such as sports teams.

Transfer students who came to this school from traditional middle schools were dissatisfied by the limited choices at this school, which added to their general frustration with Hamilton.

### **Transitioning to High School**

Getting accepted into Baltimore high schools is a competitive endeavor. While standards for admission vary, the most competitive schools generally require that students meet standards related to grades, attendance, and standardized test scores.

Starting in sixth grade at Hamilton, students are counseled about the high school options and the requirements for admission, since the application for admission includes student records from both seventh and eighth grades.

Some students reported that knowing about these choices helped to motivate them, while others expressed little interest in choosing a high school other than attending the same one as their friends.

One middle grade teacher expressed her concern over “a quiet tension” between the nurturing benefits of an elementary focus and the need to give students more independence to prepare them for the transition to high school. For example, she felt it was unnecessary to continue the practice of walking children in a line once they reached the middle grades. She acknowledged that there were no reports of transition problems once the students reached the high school, but she felt there needed to be more of a transition within the K-8 building with different requirements for the middle grade students in order to prepare them incrementally for the move.

### **Parental Involvement**

Staff members noted that parental involvement has declined in

recent years. They point to changes in the demographic makeup of the neighborhood where more parents are working, and to the growth in single-parent households.

Yet those parents who do get involved generally stay involved as their children get older. One teacher noted that, unlike at middle schools, Hamilton's middle grade students are not embarrassed when their parents come to school. "They are used to having their parents at school during the elementary years, so this is nothing new to them."

Profound frustration was expressed, however, with parents whose children had recently transferred into the school. Other teachers agreed with this teacher's assessment: "The sad thing is that most of their parents are not only nonsupportive—they're oppositional. Our students from foster care and group homes get better support from their caretakers than what some of these parents give to their own flesh and blood."

## **Conclusion**

Hamilton has a reputation as a school with a safe and structured environment where students achieve at higher levels than their peers in the district. This reputation has made it a magnet for parents looking for academic quality and higher behavioral expectations. However, district administrators also see Hamilton as a convenient place to transfer troubled students, and the influx of pupils unaccustomed to Hamilton's higher expectations is straining the school's ability to maintain its standards.

In grades 4 and 5, achievement begins to decline, reflecting a worrisome statewide (and national) trend. How much of this decline is attributable to the influx of troubled transfer students is unknown, and although students in Hamilton's middle grades outperform the district average, it is clear that the K-8 grade organization in this generally praiseworthy school has not solved the problem of lackluster achievement in the middle grades.



## 4

**HUMBOLDT PARK K-8 SCHOOL,  
MILWAUKEE**

**H**umboldt Park was built as a K-8 school in 1929. Its four-level brick building is well-maintained and retains those original architectural elements that give older buildings a special charm. The front office is a warm and welcoming place where students and parents are greeted by name. Strong community involvement is evidenced in part by the mittens, hats, and scarves donated by local senior citizens and made available to needy students.

Located in a residential neighborhood of single-family homes, the building became an elementary school in the 1970s when grades 6 through 8 were transferred elsewhere. By 2000, however, enrollment had dropped and the school was in danger of closing. In response to parental demands to keep it open, and in reaction to encouraging results from K-8 schools elsewhere, the district decided to expand Humboldt Park's enrollment again to include grades 6, 7, and 8. While students in the elementary grades are in self-contained classrooms, students in grades 6 to 8 change classes for math, reading, science, and social studies.

The school currently houses 600 students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade and is amazingly diverse. Its largest ethnic group is Hmong (35 percent), followed by Caucasian (30 percent), African-American (15 percent), and Latino (15 percent). More than seventy percent of the students receive free or reduced price lunches, and 35 percent do not speak English as their first language.

With a student population this diverse and this poor, one might expect this school to be on "the list"—that is, the list of underperforming schools that are not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) under *No Child Left Behind*. Wrong. Although this school was identified as underperforming five years ago, it came off the state's list in 2001. And despite the fact that having more grades increases a

school's odds of not making AYP, Humboldt Park has remained off the list. Many schools with a far less diverse and less impoverished pupil population have been identified as underperforming. What makes Humboldt Park different?

### Humboldt Park K-8 School

Wisconsin Student Assessment System

Fall 2004

Percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced

	Math		Reading		Lang. Arts		Science		Soc. Studies	
	School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District	School	District
Grade 4	46	44	60	60	60	57	62	45	88	75
Grade 5	74	34	71	57	56	33	58	30	76	48

Source: Standard & Poor's analysis: [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com).

In math, reading, and language arts, the achievement of fourth grade students at Humboldt Park and in the Milwaukee district are similar. By eighth grade, however, the achievement of students at Humboldt far surpasses that of students in the rest of the district in all five subjects tested. There is a gap of 40 percentage points in math, 23 in language arts, and 14 in reading. Furthermore, the gaps in science and social studies widen to 28 points. In all five subject areas, Humboldt Park students show increases in achievement as they progress into higher grades, countering both district and national trends.

Principal Kristi Cole credits her school's success to dedicated teachers and staff and a solid and rigorous curriculum. The school uses the Direct Instruction math curriculum in grades K-5 and Saxon Math in grades 6-8. All teachers from kindergarten through grade five have been trained in the highly structured Direct Instruction methodology for reading instruction. Reading textbooks are content-rich and include passages that address topics in science and history. Students are ability-grouped for instruction with assessments occurring every five lessons so they can be regrouped as necessary.

According to Cole, this flexible approach to grouping ensures

that teacher time is used most efficiently, as teachers can target their interventions more directly on the attainment levels and gaps of their various groups. For example, one group of third graders was observed working in fifth grade reading books. Cole noted: “We encourage all of our students to work to the extent of their abilities, and provide extra help for the struggling student and allow advanced learners to move ahead at a pace that suits their abilities.”

The school became a district charter school in 2005. This move was initiated by parents concerned that district mandates might cause the school to have to stop using Direct Instruction and Saxon Math, curriculum choices that parents overwhelmingly favored. Initially, some staff members were hesitant about seeking charter status, but after much study and consideration, staff came around. The change was seen as a way to support the strong academic program that had been developed, and as a means to strengthen the excellent reputation that Humboldt’s instructional program has earned.

Cole tells the story of one student who arrived as an illiterate fourth grader and could not even recognize the letters of the alphabet. The student told Cole, “I want to be in your school because I want to learn how to read.” Although diagnosed with a learning disability, the strong curriculum and flexible grouping helped this child learn to read at a third grade level after three years.

At Humboldt Park, academic expectations are as high as behavioral expectations are stringent. Students do not wear uniforms but a dress code is strictly enforced. After-school detention occurs regularly for those who misbehave or fail to complete their homework. According to Cole: “We apply our consequences consistently. This way the kids know what we expect and that we are being fair.”

When asked how this school is different from the middle school their friends attend, two eighth grade boys reported that “Humboldt has a good academic reputation.” A student who emigrated from Eastern Europe five years earlier stated: “When I talk with my friends from the middle school, I am amazed at what they don’t know. We have a higher level of education here. This school has a better academic status than the middle school.”

His friend concurred and added, “Plus, there are more fights at

the middle school.” All students interviewed commented on the personal connections staff members have with the students: “They know us *all* by name.”

## **Transitioning to K-8**

The Milwaukee school board made the decision to transition Humboldt Park to a K-8 school in 2000, and the new grades were added incrementally: sixth grade in 2001, seventh in 2002, eighth in 2003. Physical changes to the school were minimal: the addition of a science lab, a computer lab, and lockers donated by a local company.

According to staff members, one of the biggest challenges of this transition was dealing with the attitudes of the first group of older students, who remained “top dogs” in the school for four successive years. As one teacher put it, “They were quite full of themselves—they saw themselves as ‘king of the hill.’” Other staff members agreed, but saw no alternative. Adding one grade per year was a challenge, as schedules and class locations had to be changed annually. Yet no one on the staff recommended adding more than one grade per year.

Teachers recommended keeping students in grades 6, 7, and 8 in their own wing with its own entrances and exits. They wanted a separate lunch period, a recess period for sixth graders to help ease the transition out of the elementary years, and different rules for the middle grade students, including freedom to change classes without supervision and board buses without having to walk in line. Administrators and parents agreed with these requests.

## **Parental Involvement**

Cole reports that Humboldt Park parents are actively involved in everything from fundraising and volunteering to assisting with school governance. Some parents enjoy reading to children, giving school tours to visitors, and volunteering at fundraising events. Other parents participate on the school council—a serious undertaking now that it’s a charter school—where they have been actively involved in developing and sharing the school’s education plan. They have investigated and recommended curriculum options, provided budget input, and given presentations to the district school board.

Although parental participation tends to drop somewhat as children enter the higher grades, Cole notes that many parents of older children remain actively involved.

## **Transfer students**

When the transition to K-8 began, about 25 percent of the fifth grade class transferred out to the middle school rather than remain at Humboldt Park. Only a handful now exit after fifth grade. This maintains continuity in the student body and indicates parental satisfaction. As one put it, “Parents will choose what their child needs. It may be that one child needs to stay in this more structured environment to have a little more time to mature, while another needs the variety that the middle school can offer.”

Humboldt Park is filled to capacity, and since few students transfer out, very few are able to transfer in. Furthermore, enrollment priority is given to current students, even if they leave the neighborhood. In many cases, such families often strive to keep their children enrolled at Humboldt Park, despite having to provide transportation.

In spite of this school’s ethnic diversity and incidence of poverty, 75 percent of kindergartners are reading at the second grade level by year’s end. This means that when older children transfer into the school, the more academically behind they tend to be. Cole is determined to eliminate these gaps: “The challenge is to get these students caught up as soon as possible. This might mean doubling up on reading and math lessons, but it has to be done.”

The older a student is upon arrival, the more likely, too, that there will be adjustment issues, usually academic rather than social. One teacher noted: “We have after-school detention for kids who don’t complete their homework. Even kids who transferred in at fifth grade are still being sent to detention in seventh grade. They have a hard time adjusting to our higher expectations.”

## **Discipline and Behavior**

Teachers report that this school has higher behavioral expectations for students than nearby elementary and middle schools. One reported that “students feel comfortable here, and safe.” Several

teachers described students who complained that vacations were too long; they want to be in school.

Staff members had strong opinions regarding the importance of keeping children in the same environment for an extended period. According to one teacher, “Having kids for a long time helps us to build relationships with both the children and their families. They know our routine and what is expected of them.”

Students in the middle grades are located in a single wing of the building, and the assistant principal’s office is also there. One teacher expressed the sentiments of many when she remarked, “We are so lucky! We have had no fights this year and only two fights last year. Both of those were between new students, and I think they were acting out of frustration with our higher expectations. They don’t like this degree of structure.”

Yet this level of structure might be what is needed for some students. Teachers recounted the story of a boy who had been involved in gang-related activities. He was placed in Humboldt Park against his will and was sullen and defiant. His tough-guy persona initially did not make him any friends but slowly he began to come around, first adapting to his new environment and then thriving in it. Within four months, he had settled down and become fully integrated into this new school. “I believe this school helped to save him,” one teacher concluded.

## **Length of Time in the Building**

Having students who remain in the same building for a number of years allows teachers to get instant feedback from earlier teachers if a student should start to display problems. Whether academic or behavioral, teachers report that such problems can be nipped in the bud by a visit with a lower grade teacher. One middle level teacher noted, “If anyone starts to misbehave on a regular basis, or if their grades start to fall, I send them to visit their kindergarten teacher. This is usually a good wake-up call.”

## **Sexual Activity**

Teachers reported that the middle level at this school “is not a sexual environment” and were grateful that there had been no preg-

nancies. They said that while students flirt, “this mindset is more elementary” and students seem to keep their innocence longer.

### **Limited Options**

Staff members and parents note the small selection of elective offerings as a shortcoming of the K-8 model. “Parents love the nurturing environment here, but for some kids there needs to be a wider selection of course choices,” said one parent. “That is the only reason why I’ll be moving my child to the middle school when he finishes fifth grade.”

The nearby middle school has 1,100 children in grades 6, 7, and 8, and can offer competitive sports teams, band, choir, and several foreign languages—opportunities that are not feasible in a school with fewer than 100 students per grade. One parent was clearly frustrated with this: “This school could offer more if the central office would provide the funding.”

Humboldt Park offers electives for middle grade students during the first hour of the school day in courses such as Spanish, advanced math, art, physical education, and science lab. Students are not grouped by grade level for this hour, but by interest or need. They may transfer into a different elective each quarter unless they are having difficulties, in which case they must spend this hour in remedial courses until they attain grade level. This works as an incentive for struggling students: they know that if they work hard and make up their deficiencies, they will be able to take an elective class.

### **Cross-grade interactions**

Parents, teachers, and students liked the “Buddy Program” that provides opportunities for older students to mentor younger students. Middle grade classes are paired with lower-grade classes, and teachers work together to assign students to “buddy” pairs based on interest and need. Students keep the same buddies all year and work together on reading, crafts, or science projects. The activities are selected by the paired teachers and take place monthly.

This program also helps younger students improve their behavior. One eighth grade boy recounted how he was assigned to a “buddy” who had a habit of hitting other students. When the

younger child refrained from hitting, he was allowed to play games with the older student. The older boy reports, “He has really cleaned up his act.”

Older students are also allowed to tutor younger ones who are having academic difficulty, especially in math. For the most part, this occurs after school so that no one misses class time.

## **Transitioning to High School**

There were no reported adjustment problems for eighth grade students transferring to high school. Since high schools in Milwaukee have competitive enrollment based upon grade point average, class ranking, and standardized test scores, the biggest source of anxiety comes from students wondering if they will be accepted to their top high school choice.

Yet students reported great success in this regard due to the rigorous preparation they received at Humboldt. One acknowledged that “We get more homework than the kids at the middle school, and we get into trouble if we don’t do it, so we are ahead of where they are academically.”

## **Conclusion**

A teacher who worked for a short time in a traditional middle school characterized that experience in this way: “Class changes are insane. The kids go nuts for five minutes. It’s a giant testosterone pool.” She prefers the K-8 model, where class changes are minimal and highly supervised.

Another teacher wished that she had the choice of a K-8 environment for her own children: “I would have sent my kids to a K-8 school over a middle school any day. One of my kids was tormented for three whole years—it was horrible. He was lost in the crowd. I couldn’t wait for it to end. The K-8 school is a whole different world.”

Humboldt Park K-8 School was the most successful school studied for this report. Notwithstanding its ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged student population, the academic achievement of its pupils is noteworthy. A strong, structured curriculum, teachers who have been trained to implement it, and bold, decisive leadership have made Humboldt a model K-8 school.



# 5

## **JULIA DE BURGOS SCHOOL, PHILADELPHIA**

The old Julia de Burgos School was a middle school located four blocks from the present facility. Dilapidated and repeatedly condemned, it was finally shut down after more than a decade of community lobbying, and a new facility was built nearby.

Located in a densely populated urban neighborhood, the new school opened in 2000 and follows the K-8 model, a transition that is part of a plan developed by Superintendent Paul G. Vallas to move Philadelphia away from middle schools. Surrounded by both commercial enterprises and multi-family housing, it is contemporary in design, large, clean, and spacious, and has abundant natural lighting from its many windows. Outside, the grounds are enclosed by a twelve-foot-high iron fence.

Among the schools studied for this report, Julia de Burgos faces the greatest challenges. Criminal activity in the area led to establishment of an active “neighborhood watch” program called “Members of the Safe Corridors.” This volunteer group serves as the eyes and ears of the school in this community. Wearing distinctive t-shirts or jackets, these volunteers are readily identifiable to school children, who know they can approach these trusted adults if they feel unsafe or encounter trouble.

Inner city challenges were evident during just a brief time in the main office. Mothers dropping off their children were unusually young. The bulletin board held numerous notices regarding free services, free clothing, and strategies for keeping children safe. When a troubled child fled from her class during a field trip, the office staff had to shift into crisis mode and dial 911. (School personnel had been unsuccessful in their attempts to retrieve her, and there was no hesitation about involving law enforcement immediately.)

More than 900 students attend this school, and all of them live in poverty. Every child receives free or reduced price lunches. The vast majority (89 percent) are Latino, and the remaining 11 percent are African-American. Many students (40 percent) do not speak English at home. There is also an unusually large number of students (20 percent) identified as needing special education services. In addition, a significant number of students have profound mental health issues. They are educated in separate settings, grouped by age.

Julia Rios-McManus, the principal since the school opened, is a dynamic leader with high expectations for both students and staff. Although highly respected by her staff today, some teachers initially questioned her leadership. According to one upper grade teacher: “Some of us resisted her leadership at first, but ultimately we saw that she was right. She is driven by a vision and her heart is in the right place. She cares so much. She tries to give us everything we need to make these kids successful. She won’t give up.”

All classes at Julia de Burgos are self-contained. This approach initially met resistance from middle school teachers who transferred into the school when it opened, as they were accustomed to a departmentalized structure. However, most teachers now prefer the self-contained setting. The principal agreed to allow teachers to move into a departmentalized structure in 2004-2005, but teachers ultimately returned to the self-contained model. Says one, “A self-contained class means a lot more work, but it helps us to build a better bond with our kids.”

The school’s uniform policy requires students (as well as faculty) to wear blue trousers (or skirts) and a white collared shirt.

In the last year for which data are available (2003-2004), 20 to 39 percent of students at Julia de Burgos scored at or above the national average on the TerraNova test—meaning that more than half scored below the national average. Teachers attribute this to the high percentage of students (40 percent) who do not speak English as their native language. It should be noted that Humboldt K-8 school in Milwaukee has nearly as many children who do not speak English (35 percent), but much higher achievement.

However, all grades showed gains over the last three years, notably in math, with an additional 16 to 30 percent of students scor-

ing at or above the national average. The strongest gains occurred at grade seven. Furthermore, looking at cohorts of students over time, achievement is gaining (with the exception of grade 7 math in 2003), although it remains low overall.

**Julia De Burgos**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**  
**Percentage of students at or above the national average**  
**(Terra Nova)**

## **A “Top-Heavy” Student Body**

The most common concern among teachers was the “top heavy” student body. While there are only two classes per grade from kindergarten through grade five, there are six classes of sixth graders and four classes each in grades seven and eight.

This imbalance is caused by the students from multiple K-5 schools who transfer into Julia de Burgos in grade six. Teachers report that the district plans to eliminate these transfers in the 2005-06 school year and move the large group of sixth graders through grades seven and eight, resulting in three classes at each grade level by 2007-08.

One teacher said: “The little ones are outnumbered now. Just the sheer number of the older students means that their influence is going to dominate the school.”

Teachers of elementary-aged children were more troubled by the imbalance than were teachers of older children. According to one teacher: “The issue is younger children’s needs versus older children’s behaviors. Sometimes it is frustrating when policies designed

to control the behavior of older children impact the needs of younger children.”

## School Design

Some teachers feel that the school has been designed specifically with older students in mind: “We can’t create spaces, nooks, or centers in our classrooms because the built-ins are immovable. And then there are other things, such as chalk boards that are hung too high.” The teachers of the younger students indicated that a change in the physical

	Reading				Math			
	F02	Sp03	Sp04	3 Year Change	F02	Sp03	Sp04	3 Year Change
Grade 6	14.9	17.1	19.7	<b>4.8</b>	14.0	19.5	29.9	<b>15.9</b>
Grade 7	16.0	17.2	25.8	<b>9.8</b>	5.7	6.0	35.2	<b>29.5</b>
Grade 8	19.8	23.3	21.3	<b>1.5</b>	10.0	29.6	38.7	<b>28.7</b>

Source: Standard & Poor’s analysis: [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com).

things easier. They also felt that the

school’s design was not conducive to accommodating a mix of younger and older students. One concern was interactions in the hallways: “The older students walk in lines when they go through the halls, but that doesn’t prevent them from using foul language. I don’t want my kids exposed to that.” Another teacher felt that younger students “pick up bad habits in the halls” and receive the wrong message when they see older students misbehave: “They mimic the big kids, and think that foul language is acceptable.”

One teacher expressed the sentiment of others when she said: “We need a separate wing for older students, and a separate entrance. They don’t mean to be rough with the younger students, but their size and level of activity can be frightening to the little ones.”

In spite of these challenges, teachers were still supportive of the K-8 model. According to one teacher who formerly taught at a middle school: “I’ve been there—I’ve seen what it was like. There was total chaos. We might have occasional problems, but here the kids are under control.”

## **Cross-grade Interactions**

One eighth grade teacher with middle school experience tells the older students that they are the leaders of the school, and as such, have an obligation to be role models for others.

In order to encourage older pupils to become positive role models for younger children, the school is piloting a “Buddy Reading” program that pairs eighth graders with kindergartners. The older students read to and interact with the younger ones. The school hopes that they will build a caring relationship during the school year. The school intends to expand the program next year.

## **Discipline and Behavior**

Teachers noted that a disproportionate number of discipline problems at this school occurred in sixth grade, when new students unfamiliar with the higher behavioral expectations transferred in from other places.

Teachers were compassionate as they talked about troubled children, but realistic about their ability to meet the needs of such children. They expressed concern about those students whose learning was disrupted by children with behavior problems: “I have such high hopes for these troubled ones, but I have to think about the other thirty. If I can’t reach a kid, there comes a time that he needs to be in another setting—something hard core and strict—with the hope of turning him around.”

The Philadelphia district has adopted such a program, known as Community Education Partnership (CEP). It was implemented in 2002 as part of a tough new approach to discipline. A student is sent to a CEP school if he or she is consistently disruptive in class or has been in trouble with the law. The program focuses on rigorous behavioral interventions and includes intense academic remediation, resulting in some students making two academic years of growth in one school year.<sup>60</sup>

Support for the program was strong among teachers, who believe that it helps both the disruptive student (by bringing his/her behavior under control) and the regular student (whose learning is not disrupted). CEP has the reputation of a tough rehabilitation program.

Students are aware of this, and teachers commented that one way to get a problem child to reconsider his or her behavior was to tell that student “you’d better shape up or you’ll be sent to CEP.” Several teachers mentioned that some parents who are disinterested and uninvolved receive a “wake-up call” once their child ends up at CEP.

Both teachers and students identified Julia de Burgos as far safer and more nurturing than neighboring middle schools. Eighth graders commented on the differences they see between the schools: “It’s easier to make friends here. You get to know kids better because you stay with them all day long.”

The students became highly animated when asked about fights in school. According to one student: “There are fights all the time at the middle school. It’s stricter here, but it is also safer.” Students and teachers both indicated that most fights at the middle school occurred during class changes. Due to self-contained classrooms, students at Julia de Burgos do not change classes except to attend electives, and they are walked in line to those classes.

When asked if they would like to transfer to the neighboring middle school, the students shouted a unanimous “NO!” In fact, one young man said that his friends “wished they could attend school here.”

## **Sexual Activity**

Teachers who had previously taught in a middle school setting commented on the sexually charged atmosphere they encountered there: “There was a growing tendency for girls to be promiscuous, and both sexes were starting to ‘explore.’ You don’t see that here—for the most part, the older students have a sense of pride in themselves as role models for the younger kids.” Another teacher concurred, noting: “Sure, there is flirting, but kids here stay innocent longer.”

Several teachers noted that, while Philadelphia middle schools had active pregnancy prevention and self-esteem programs (which this school does not have), the students at their K-8 school were better at postponing sexual activity.

## **Transfer Students**

The large influx of middle-grade pupils from multiple feeder

schools poses a huge challenge. These students often have problems transitioning into a new routine, adapting to a more structured environment, and meeting higher academic expectations. Teachers unanimously believed that, as a group, the transfer students were academically behind. They blame lower academic expectations at the other schools. “It’s sad to say,” said one teacher, “but we are inheriting other people’s problems.”

Different types of transfer student, such as those at Baltimore’s Hamilton school who are sent to the school for disciplinary reasons, were not identified as a major issue at this school. Teachers gratefully acknowledged the commitment of Superintendent Vallas to remove disruptive students from the regular classroom and not overload any one school with excessive numbers of children with chronic behavioral problems. One teacher stated: “The central office is sensitive to limiting the number of disciplinary referrals. They’re supportive of our efforts to build and keep a good program and understand the problems that large numbers of troubled students can bring to a structured program.”

The CEP program, discussed above, was cited as the chief reason why relatively few discipline problems were transferred into the school.

### **Length of Time in the Building**

Teachers agreed that older children benefit from having access to their previous teachers. One upper grade teacher said: “I just have to send a student down the hall and have one of their old teachers talk to them. . . . [T]hey know that there are many adults here—not just a few—who know them well and care about them.”

Teachers felt that having multiple adults paying attention to children over time helped to improve behavior.

Teachers who had worked in a middle school setting initially missed the “small learning communities” often found at middle schools, but came to value the sense of community that multiple adult figures provide in a K-8 setting.

### **Parent Involvement**

Teachers who had formerly worked in middle schools stated that

there is a larger degree of parental involvement at Julia de Burgos. For example, parents are supposed to pick up their child's report cards in person. If they don't show up, the report cards are sent home in the mail. According to one teacher: "At the middle school, I'd be lucky if one or two parents showed up. Now I'd say at least 50 percent come to visit on report card day." Some teachers argued that this was because parents with more than one child can now pick up all of their children's report cards in just one trip.

Compared to the middle school, parents tend to be involved with the school for longer periods of time. "They get into the habit of being involved when the kids are young, and since their child remains in the same school, it's not unusual for them to stay involved."

One teacher noted, however, that a parent who is chronically disengaged is generally that way from the start: "I have first graders whose parents are disinterested and uninvolved. It starts that early."

Parents' jobs are seen as the greatest challenge to involvement. According to one teacher: "As more and more parents are working, they have fewer opportunities to be involved in school. It's not that they don't want to be here—it's that they have to put food on the table."

## Limited Options

Teachers acknowledge that one limitation of the K-8 model is that older students have fewer options, in both academic and extra-curricular activities. While courses in computers, music, art, and physical education are available, there is no access to foreign languages or advanced math such as Algebra. However, teachers reported that plans are underway to provide more course offerings.

Athletic options, while less critical, are limited as well. Julia de Burgos offers boys' basketball and coed track, while the neighboring middle schools offer those sports as well as girls' basketball, soccer, volleyball, and softball. The district, as one teacher laments, provides a more generous athletic budget to middle schools, virtually ignoring sports at the K-8 level because these schools are considered



elementary schools.

## **Conclusion**

The consensus among teachers at Julia de Burgos was that, in spite of the challenges they faced, a K-8 school could serve students well, especially if the school could “grow our own kids.” Ideally, this would mean minimal transfers into the school.

The teachers are clearly committed to helping their children rise above the challenges of their environment. Although there have been some academic gains, at this point student achievement remains low. Yet teachers report seeing a new sort of strength in the younger students as they progress through the grades: “When the kids who started here as kindergartners get into eighth grade, it will be a whole new world. We can already see what higher expectations can produce, and once we have these students over time, the results only get better.” Another teacher agreed: “The longer we have them, the more successful they are.”

Furthermore, there was a sense that the K-8 model was a good cultural fit for the Latino community, which places a high value on the family. It was felt that parents could become more engaged in a school where they might have several children in different grades.

## 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The middle school movement began with great fanfare and the earnest hope of better serving the academic needs of early adolescents. But it got caught up in the times, in the social unrest and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, when a swelling chorus of education theorists called for middle schools to pursue a non-academic agenda. These voices grew louder and more organized through the 1980s, and in 1989 the release of *Turning Points* served as a catalyst to ignite these ideas and launch wholesale implementation of the middle school “concept,” reorienting these schools toward “social experimentation”<sup>61</sup> and away from academics. Instead of a learner in urgent pursuit of cognitive skills and knowledge, those advocating for the middle school “concept” painted the early adolescent as a victim: an unhappy, dysfunctional figure whose manifold problems could only be solved by a new, softer middle school environment that focused on adjustment, socialization, and immersion in coercive egalitarian practices.

Unfortunately for the flagbearers of middle-schoolism, both anecdotal and empirical evidence soon showed that student achievement in the middle grades was declining rapidly. Measures of academic achievement indicated that the pace of learning for American students between grades 4 and 8 was far less than that of students in other countries—and was nothing short of alarming. The damage done by favoring non-academic endeavors has clearly taken its toll.

Parents and educators willing to question the middle school model are—perhaps belatedly—demanding a change. A growing number of them want the middle school “concept” eliminated and the middle grades refocused on academics. The obstacle that they face is that many influential leaders in the middle school establishment remain wedded to middle schoolism, its ineffective pedagogical theories, and its outmoded notions of child development.

How can America move beyond middle schoolism? Advice can be found in the writings of C.S. Lewis:

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.<sup>62</sup>

“Going back is the quickest way on.” Perhaps this best summarizes the key strategy for undoing the damage done to American education by the policies of radical middle school activists—*going back* to find scientifically based research that reveals the strengths or weaknesses of specific educational practices, *going back* to proven methodologies, and *going back* to parents and empathetically listening to their concerns.

The key to renewing middle-grades education in the United States is precisely to treat it as *education*, rather than personal adjustment. That means 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 in the U.S., and it can pay off in the middle grades as well. It is, furthermore, no more than is now expected of American schools under the No Child Left Behind act. By refocusing on academics, those middle schools that had gone astray would simply be recognizing and implementing the growing new realities of accountability in American K-12 education.

## Rejecting Middle Schoolism

The resurgence of the K-8 school may be the most vivid sign of how educators and the public are shelving the middle school “concept.” But other schools are rejecting the middle school “concept” even while maintaining a middle school grade configuration. Here are two impressive examples:

**KIPP DC: KEY Academy, Washington, D.C.:** The student body at the KEY Academy is exclusively black and 80 percent of the students come from families in poverty. Academically, entering fifth

graders are a minimum of two years behind grade level. This public charter school opened in 2001, and since 2004 its students have outperformed their peers in all other middle schools in the district. In math, seventh grade students at this school score in the top 10 percent nationwide.

Through intensive remediation, nine-hour school days, and mandatory Saturday school, students are able to overcome their academic deficiencies to the point where they are able to take—and pass—high school algebra in eighth grade. KEY stands for “Knowledge Empowers You,” and high expectations rule the day. The school has two simple rules that are strictly enforced: Work hard and be nice.

This year saw KEY Academy’s first graduating class. Half of this school’s eighth grade graduates received scholarships totaling \$1.5 million to attend the area’s most prestigious schools, including Deerfield Academy, Sidwell Friends, and St. Alban’s.<sup>63</sup>

**American Indian Public Charter School (AIPCS), Oakdale, California:** More than 80 percent of students at this charter school receive free or reduced-price lunches, and one-fifth are Native Americans. (The rest are a diverse urban mix.) Students regularly enter this school two grade levels behind, but under the leadership of Principal Ben Chavis, AIPCS has produced astonishing improvements in student achievement.

Chavis eliminated a morning “drum circle” where students talked about their feelings, replacing it with a 90-minute block of intense instruction in reading, writing, spelling, and grammar. He has implemented a self-contained classroom instructional model that eliminates class changes for his students, and has lofty expectations for staff and students alike, such as high school level algebra for eighth graders. In 2004, AIPCS had the highest achievement of any secondary school in the district and was the first secondary school in this district to exceed 800 points on the state’s Academic Performance Index.<sup>64</sup>

Obviously, the leaders and teachers at KIPP or AIPCS do not believe that their students’ brains “virtually cease to grow.” Remarkable results can be achieved in a middle-school configuration

when dedicated staff members, strong leadership, and a rigorous and challenging curriculum are in place.

The middle school “concept” has dominated the American educational landscape for far too long. Forward-looking communities and educators are exploring, and in many cases actively implementing, successful alternatives. Besides Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, cities such as Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Minneapolis, Newark, New Orleans, and New York are all moving, in various degrees, away from the middle school and toward the K-8 model. As we’ve seen, other middle schools are maintaining the middle school configuration while rejecting the pedagogical and philosophical tenets of middle schoolism.

I believe that either approach—academically focused middle schools or reviving K-8 education—can be an antidote to the failure of middle schoolism. There is clear evidence that the K-8 model has a significant positive effect on academic achievement, openness to learning, and student behavior, and it should be considered in all discussions of middle grades reform. Clearly, there are challenges inherent to the K-8 model: curricular and extracurricular offerings can be limited, the transition to high school may be difficult for some students, and buildings that were originally designed for middle schoolers or elementary students frequently require refurbishing to make them useful for younger or older students. And as we’ve seen, success can bring its own hurdles, as districts transfer in troubled or academically challenged students to a school that is succeeding—thus jeopardizing the very success that made the school so attractive in the first place. Of course, nothing worth doing is without difficulty. On balance, the evidence is strong that the K-8 model, properly implemented and sustained, can be far superior to the middle school model.

## **Planning for the Future**

So, how should administrators and teachers considering such a move—from a middle school to K-8, or adding upper grades to an existing elementary school—strive to minimize these challenges? Any such transition entails three phases: planning, implementing, and sustaining. Here I offer some suggestions to guide each stage,

starting with the planning phase.

● ***Include parents.*** To ensure that the new school will be responsive to parents, parents should participate in all aspects of the planning process. Policy decisions from curricula to dress code to behavior call for parental input. The most successful school featured in this report, Humboldt K-8 School in Milwaukee, also has the most active and organized parents. (Nor is their engagement an artifact of socio-economics: 70 percent of students at this school come from low-income homes.)

● ***Establish high academic and behavioral expectations.*** Most parents want three things from their children's schools: safety, order, and the basics.

This is also common sense: high academic achievement cannot be attained in an undisciplined environment. Of the schools cited in this report, Baltimore's Hamilton had the most behavior problems and was also the only one whose students' achievement declined in the upper grades.

Policies establishing academic and behavioral norms will set the new school's tone for years to come, and parents need to be involved in drafting them. Programs that motivate and reward good behavior and strong academic achievement, such as "student of the month" awards and honor rolls, should also be developed by faculty and parents.

Behavioral expectations need not be uniform school-wide. Consideration should be given to providing some flexibility for upper grade students, giving them greater freedom and responsibility as they prepare to transition to high school. For example, hallway supervision for the upper grades: should students be led in a line by their teacher, or change classes unsupervised? Experience favors more supervision, but some schools will want to diminish it over time.

● ***Make sixth grade a transition year.*** Moving from the elementary area of the school to the upper-grade part requires that students become familiar with a different place and different norms. Since

such a change usually comes in sixth grade, it would be helpful to provide flexibility as students make the transition. Retaining some elements of the elementary school, such as recess, may help sixth grade to function as a bridge between the elementary and middle grades.

● ***Adapt the school facility.*** Ideally, a separate wing with separate entrances and exits for older students allows them some time on their own and prevents unwanted interaction with younger students. Humboldt Park in Milwaukee does a good job of this. In contrast, Philadelphia's Julia de Burgos School, which has the least separation among its students, reported the most trouble with older/younger student interactions.

It might seem contradictory to praise such interactions while simultaneously calling for physical separation. But this is easily explained: Student interactions that are supervised were welcomed by all of the schools studied, while unsupervised interactions sometimes brought problems, especially in schools with large numbers of transfer students in the upper grades.

Other physical modifications may need to be made to the library and cafeteria, such as adding computers or including more books appropriate for middle-grade pupils. Other needed changes might include lockers for older students or building a more advanced science lab, and all modifications will add to transition costs. If the library has limited space, a separate computer lab might be needed. If more children use the cafeteria, scheduling changes might be necessary. Menu changes may also be indicated. Different adaptations must occur when transitioning from a middle school to a K-8 school, such as allowing for the creation of centers and "nooks" in primary classrooms and modifying restrooms by lowering sinks and toilets.

● ***Transitioning from an elementary to K-8 school.*** 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. Faculty at Humboldt Park were unanimous that, when adding grades 6, 7, and 8, one grade should be added per year. This gives time for adjustments by students, faculty, support staff, and

administration.

● ***Grade-level balance.*** Attaining demographic balance among the various grade levels is a priority. Too many older students means their needs can drive school policies and set the school tone, and vice versa. If transition logistics require an imbalance, then care should be taken to ensure that (1) staff members are aware of the undue weight that “dominant” grades might bring to a school, and (2) such an imbalance is temporary.

● ***Establish a strict transfer policy.*** It is unrealistic to think that a school will have an immobile population, so district officials should look to the issues raised in the case studies and acknowledge the challenges that transfer students bring. Involuntary transfers are harder for schools to deal with and typically occur when the district administration decides to relocate children who have had difficulties elsewhere. In Philadelphia, this issue is wisely handled via an alternative program that accommodates the most serious discipline problems. There appears to be no such program in Baltimore, leaving staff members and faculty frustrated with the challenge of teaching children who do not have problems while simultaneously rehabilitating those who do. These troubled children have hurt the entire school and caused certain activities, such as those involving cross-grade interaction, to be eliminated. While the issue of where to place troubled children is usually made at the district level, it appears that little consideration is given to its effects on schools in Baltimore.

Voluntary transfers present other challenges. Students who arrive from a school with less structure and lower academic standards might find the transition a difficult one. Humboldt Park addresses this by requiring mandatory after-school lessons until children catch up. Another option could be to provide an opportunity for these children to receive remediation in the summer before the school year starts. Either way, a policy must be in place that helps transfer students who have difficulty adjusting.

● ***Self-contained or departmentalized?*** Upper-grade teachers at the schools in Baltimore and Milwaukee are organized by academic



department. The teachers at Julia de Burgos School in Philadelphia initially sought that structure but now prefer the self-contained approach. Both have strengths and weaknesses.

The self-contained model, where 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 may force teachers into fields with which they are unfamiliar or have received no specialized training. The departmentalized setting, where each teacher is a specialist in one or more areas, has greater likelihood of producing higher academic achievement but at some cost in human contact, class cohesiveness, and opportunities to counsel and mentor students.

Nationally, middle level teachers with subject-specific certificates appear to be a dying breed. In 1980, 80 percent of them held subject-specific certificates, but that number dropped to 52 percent by 2000.<sup>65</sup> One study shows that, during the 1999-2000 school year, alarming percentages of middle grade students were taught by teachers who lacked a college major or certification in the areas they were teaching: English (58 percent), science (57 percent), math (69 percent), history (71 percent), and physical science (93 percent).<sup>66</sup> Another recent study by Tom Loveless found that only 22 percent of the middle school math teachers surveyed indicated that they had majored in math, and fewer than half had a teaching certificate in that subject.<sup>67</sup>

It is fairly well established that strong subject area knowledge on the part of teachers correlates with higher student achievement.<sup>68</sup> Hence it shocked many to learn in 2004 that half of Philadelphia's middle level teachers failed to pass exams assessing their content knowledge. While such gaps among teachers can be seen as a failing of colleges of education, they may also be artifacts of the movement away from academics that has characterized much of the middle school movement's history. For example, one middle school teacher in Philadelphia had this troubling reaction to the failing scores of his colleagues: "Content sometimes is really overrated. A teacher is like an artist, a coach. He has to be able to inspire children."<sup>69</sup>

While it is unrealistic to expect a teacher in a self-contained set-

ting to hold an academic major or certification in every subject he/she is teaching, it is imperative that students receive instruction that is rigorous and challenging. Finding the balance between academic achievement and a nurturing environment is a challenge that K-8 planners have to address, and a truly compassionate education cannot allow the desire for a nurturing environment to trump access to a strong and well-taught curriculum.

### **Implementation: Making It Work**

Once a K-8 school is up and running, strategies must be in place to ensure that it continues to function well. These should include:

- ***Continued parental involvement.*** The K-8 model seems to encourage sustained levels of parental involvement and school leaders should make the most of it. Opportunities should be far-reaching, including traditional activities such as participating in a site council to address curriculum and discipline, volunteering, and fundraising.

- ***Demand that high behavioral and academic expectations are met.*** Obviously, students and parents should be made aware of the higher expectations that come with this new school and be told of opportunities for adapting to these changes. Academically, this might include after-school remediation or tutoring—some of which is likely available under the *No Child Left Behind* act.

Behavioral expectations, of course, can best be met when rules are consistently applied. Disruptions at Humboldt Park lead to after-school detention, but after students become accustomed to the higher expectations and see that rules are actually going to be applied every time, the principal reports that fewer students are now being sent to detention.

- ***Control interactions between older and younger students.*** At the Julia de Burgos School, there are separate entrances for the lower and upper grades, but to get to their doors, younger children have to walk through the area where older children congregate, and unwanted interactions have been the unfortunate result. Observing

how the physical layout of a school affects cross-grade interactions—and then adjusting practices in light of those expectations—is an important task in the first months of a school’s existence.

- ***Take advantage of continuity of attendance.*** Teachers should be encouraged to make maximum use of the expertise of previous teachers when addressing any problems their own students might be experiencing.

## **Sustaining Success**

Once a K-8 school is running smoothly, the goal is to maintain that success. There are several key elements to sustaining academic and behavioral success.

- ***Provide greater access to advanced courses and electives.*** One weakness identified by nearly all of those involved with a K-8 school was the dearth of elective courses. Because there are fewer students in the upper grades, it is difficult for K-8 schools to offer advanced subjects that can enrich a curriculum, such as foreign language classes or advanced math. Yet innovative solutions can be found. One is to work collaboratively with other K-8 schools in the district, or even the local high school, to have itinerant teachers come to the school to offer such classes. This may demand scheduling flexibility, but no child should be denied challenging academic opportunities due to the grade configuration of their school. Another option might involve distance learning.

- The importance of including access to higher levels of math cannot be understated. A 1999 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 were prepared for completion of a bachelor’s degree, and rigorous courses cannot be taken in high school if students have not laid the foundation in earlier grades. Moreover, this researcher stated that “the impact of a high school curriculum of high academic intensity and quality on degree completion is far more pronounced—and positively—for African

American and Latino students than any other pre-college indicator of academic resources.”<sup>70</sup> He also found that poor children who have access to high quality, rigorous education are more likely to graduate from college than wealthier children who do not have access to a challenging curriculum. In other words, it is critical to ensure that students in a K-8 setting have access to higher levels of math.

- ***Provide access to more extra-curricular opportunities.*** With a larger student body, middle schools can offer band, choir, and sports to a degree that K-8 schools cannot. However, if several K-8 schools work together, it may be possible to field a team or create a band or choir. Extra-curricular activities could also be coordinated after school for all students in grades 6, 7, and 8, regardless of whether they attend a K-8 school or a middle school. (Challenges to providing these opportunities include transportation and funding.)

- ***Level the funding playing field.*** 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 classifications. When this occurs, it sometimes blocks K-8 schools from receiving funding for extracurricular activities. As with academics, no child should be denied opportunities based simply upon the grade configuration of the school he or she attends.

## **Areas of Future Study**

K-8 schools can be created in a number of ways. Each approach brings strengths and challenges, and the analysis of K-8 and middle school models presents many opportunities for further research. Districts should seek opportunities to put the theories and field observations about K-8 schools to the test, through rigorous and credible studies. For example:

- ***Self-contained vs. departmentalized instruction:*** Which produces stronger academic results? Is achievement a function of instructional organization or teachers’ subject-area expertise? Does one model produce a greater sense of belonging for disadvantaged children? Answers to these questions will help to inform the decision-

making of those planning K-8 schools.

● ***Transition effects:*** As seen in the case studies, different dynamics are at play when the transition to K-8 involves adding higher grades to an elementary school or lower grades to a middle school. Does the original organization of a school have a lasting influence on its new life as a K-8 school? How are the challenges different in these two different transitions?

● ***Strategies for transfer students:*** Voluntary and involuntary transfers can have a huge impact on the successful functioning of schools. Do students who arrive at a K-8 school in the upper grades with preliminary preparation, such as a summer catch-up program, perform better than students who do not receive such preparation?

● ***Sexual activity:*** Does attending a K-8 school versus a middle school impact the onset of sexual activity and its consequences (pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases)?

● ***Impact of Charter Schools:*** Humboldt Park is the highest achieving K-8 school visited, and also the only charter school. What role does its charter status play? Do the flexibility and accountability inherent in charter schools enhance the achievement of students in the middle grades?

● ***Ethnic and cultural considerations:*** High dropout rates and lower academic achievement are issues in some minority communities. Could K-8 schools be more successful than middle schools in narrowing these achievement gaps among low-income or minority students?

● **Moving Forward**

The K-8 model is no “silver bullet” for middle school reform, but it deserves consideration. In this era of flexible educational options, there is room for K-8 schools and middle schools to co-exist—provided that middle schools embrace standards and accountability. We have seen both K-8 schools and middle schools that provide chal-

lenging academic coursework and safe, orderly environments. Similarly, we have seen both K-8 and middle schools whose achievement is woefully low.

The growth of options such as public charter schools and vouchers means that school districts must become more responsive to parental demands than they were in the past. The role of charter schools should be studied with regard to its compatibility with middle level achievement. The highest performing K-8 school reviewed in this study, Humboldt Park K-8 School in Milwaukee, is a charter school, as are the high-performing KIPP DC Academy and American Indian Public Charter School.

While some middle schools are performing well and have the full support of their communities, others need a complete overhaul. Either way, one thing is clear: “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” Members of the public are not willing to be fooled again. Just one example: In early 2005, educators and administrators in Blue Earth County, Minnesota tried to persuade the community to accept the middle school “concept” on grounds that “youngsters at age 12 to 14 experience relatively little brain growth.” The community reacted swiftly and decisively. They were not about to allow their schools to be infected with the middle school “concept,” driven by discredited and damaging theories, especially since other schools across the country are now forswearing the concept.<sup>71</sup>

An educated public, the raising of standards, and pressure for results-based accountability are all helping to drive a stake into the heart of the middle school “concept.” Middle schools that resist commonsense reforms and fail to provide a safe and academically rigorous environment will find that fewer parents willing to trust them with their child’s education. This is the age of accountability in education, and organizational structures that fail to emphasize academic achievement and sound discipline—like the middle school “concept”—are clearly destined for marginalization, if not complete extinction.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>. J. Beane, "Middle schools under siege: Responding to the attack," *Middle School Journal*, vol. 30, no. 5 (May 1999b), p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup>. Beane, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>3</sup>. J. Beane, National Middle School Association annual conference, Session 2322 (November 2001).
- <sup>4</sup>. Archibald, G. (February 27, 2005). "Governors unite to solve nation's high school 'crisis.'" *Washington Times*.
- <sup>5</sup>. This study was originally called the Third International Math and Science Study. The name was changed in 2004.
- <sup>6</sup>. *2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trend Data*, National Center for Education Statistics, July 2005. (Access this report on the web at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ltt/results2004/>.)
- <sup>7</sup>. P.S. George, "Education 2000: Which way the middle school?" *The Clearing House*, vol. 62 (September 1988), p. 14.
- <sup>8</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup>. *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies*, National Education Association (New York: American Book Company, 1894), as cited in S.N. Clark & D.C. Clark, *Restructuring the middle level school: Implications for school leaders*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 8.
- <sup>10</sup>. S.N. Clark & D.C. Clark, *Restructuring the Middle Level School: Implications for School Leaders* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).
- <sup>11</sup>. W. Gruhn & H. Douglass, *The Modern Junior High School* (New York: Ronald Press, 1971) and W.M. Alexander & P.S. George, *The Exemplary Middle School* (New York: Holt: 1981).
- <sup>12</sup>. Koos (1927), p. 50; as cited in Clark & Clark (1994), p. 12.
- <sup>13</sup>. R. Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York:



Vintage Books, 1963).

- <sup>14</sup>. Ibid., p. 352.
- <sup>15</sup>. A.H. Lauchner, "How can the junior high curriculum be improved?" *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, vol. 35, no. 177 (March 1951), pp. 299-300; as cited in A. Bestor, *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 55-56.
- <sup>16</sup>. J. Grantes, C. Noyce, F. Patterson, & J. Robertson, *The Junior High School We Need* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1961).
- <sup>17</sup>. W. Alexander & P. George, *The Exemplary Middle School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981).
- <sup>18</sup>. Alexander (1988); Alexander & George (1981); George, et al. (1992).
- <sup>19</sup>. C.L. Midjaas, "The middle school: An opportunity for humanized education," speech delivered at Northern Michigan University Planning Symposium (May 8, 1970), ERIC document number ED 046 110, pp. 2, 4, 5.
- <sup>20</sup>. T.E. Gatewood & C.A. Dilig, *The Middle School We Need* (Washington, D.C., Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1975) pp. 3, 4. Copyrighted material used with permission from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- <sup>21</sup>. H.T. Epstein & C.F. Toepfer, "A neuroscience basis for reorganizing middle grades education," *Educational Leadership*, vol. 35, no. 8 (May 1978), p. 657. Copyrighted material used with permission from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- <sup>22</sup>. Epstein & Toepfer (1978), pp. 657; 657-658; 660.
- <sup>23</sup>. See T. Moon, C.A. Tomlinson, & C.M. Callahan. (1995). *Academic diversity in the middle school: Results of a national survey of middle school administrators and teachers*. Monograph number

95124 of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.

- <sup>24</sup>. P.S. George, "Education 2000: Which way the middle school?" *The Clearing House*, vol. 62 (September 1988), p. 14.
- <sup>25</sup>. Ibid., pp. 15, 17.
- <sup>26</sup>. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*, National Commission on Excellence in Education. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).
- <sup>27</sup>. *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1989), Carnegie Corporation, Washington, D.C. p. 25.
- <sup>28</sup>. Ibid., pp. 13, 21 and 8, 9, 10.
- <sup>29</sup>. J.H. Lounsbury, "A fresh start for the middle school curriculum," *Middle School Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2 (November 1991), pp. 4; 3-7. Copyrighted material used with permission from the National Middle School Association (NMSA).
- <sup>30</sup>. C.P. Yecke. *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America's Middle Schools*. Rowman and Littlefield (2005), Appendix A.
- <sup>31</sup>. A.H. Bloom, "What are you teaching my son?" *Educational Leadership*, vol. 53, no. 7 (April 1996), p. 83.
- <sup>32</sup>. J.H. Johnston & R.D. Williamson, "Listening to four communities: Parent and public concerns about middle level schools," *NASSP Bulletin*, vol. 82, no. 597 (April 1998), pp. 44-52.
- <sup>33</sup>. S. Farkas & J. Johnson, *Given the Circumstances; Teacher Talk About Public Education Today* (New York: Public Agenda: 1996).
- <sup>34</sup>. J. Johnson & S. Farkas, *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools*, (New York: Public Agenda, 1997).
- <sup>35</sup>. *Mathematics and Science Education in the Eighth Grade: Findings from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study*, National Center for Educational Statistics, statistical analysis

report, (July, 2000). See also *Highlights from TIMSS: Overview and Key Findings Across Grade Levels*, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1999), NCES document 1999-081.

- <sup>36</sup>. *Policy Brief: What the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Means for Systemic School Improvement*, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, November 1998), p. vii.
- <sup>37</sup>. Debra Viadero, "U.S. seniors near bottom in world test," *Education Week*, vol. 17, no. 25 (March 4, 1998).
- <sup>38</sup>. A. Bradley, "Muddle in the Middle," *Education Week* (April 15, 1998) p. 38.
- <sup>39</sup>. D. Brockett, "School leaders, researchers re-examining middle reform," *School Board News* (November 10, 1998), p. 5.
- <sup>40</sup>. D. Ruenzel, "Coming of age," *Teacher Magazine*, vol. 9, no. 5 (February 1998), p. 32.
- <sup>41</sup>. See David J. Hoff, "U.S. students' scores drop by 8th grade," *Education Week* (December 13, 2000).
- <sup>42</sup>. *Pursuing Excellence: Comparisons of International Eighth Grade Mathematics and Science Achievement from a U.S. Perspective, 1995 and 1999, Initial Findings from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study – Repeat*, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, December 2000), p. 41. See also *Highlights from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study – Repeat (TIMSS-R)*, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education), NCES document 2001-027.
- <sup>43</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 42. (See also David J. Hoff, "U.S. students' scores drop by 8th grade," *Education Week*, December 13, 2000.)
- <sup>44</sup>. C. Colgan, "U.S. students show no progress in latest TIMSS

results,” *School Board News* (December 19, 2000).

- <sup>45</sup>. S. Cavanaugh and E.W. Robelen, “U.S. Students fare poorly in international math comparison (December 7, 2004), *Education Week*.
- <sup>46</sup>. Yecke, C.P. (2003). *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America’s Middle Schools*. (This book was first published by Praeger Publishing in 2003 and was reissued by Rowman and Littlefield in 2005.)
- <sup>47</sup>. Rand Corporation. (2004). *Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School* (Research Brief), p. 1.
- <sup>48</sup>. *2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trend Data*
- <sup>49</sup>. National Middle School Association annual conference program (2000), session 3205, pp. 140; 171.
- <sup>50</sup>. C.F. Toepfer, “What to know about young adolescents,” *Social Education*, vol. 52, no. 2 (1988), p. 110.
- <sup>51</sup>. P. George, “Threat and Promise: Middle schools in Florida—Where are we now?” National Middle School Association annual conference, Session 2234 (November 2, 2001).
- <sup>52</sup>. Chaker, A.M. (April 6, 2005). “Middle school goes out of fashion.” *The Wall Street Journal*.
- <sup>53</sup>. D. Harrington-Lueker, “Middle schools fail to make the grade,” *USA Today* (March 15, 2001). Available online at [www.usatoday.com/news/comment/2001-03-15-ncgquest1.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/comment/2001-03-15-ncgquest1.htm).
- <sup>54</sup>. Simmons, R. & Blyth, D. (1987). *Moving into Adolescence: The Impact of Pubertal Change and School Context*. Hawthorne, NJ: Aldine.
- <sup>55</sup>. Offenber, R.M. (March 2001). The efficacy of Philadelphia’s K-to-8 schools compared to middle grades schools. *Middle School Journal*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 23-29
- <sup>56</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

- <sup>57</sup>. Baltimore City Public School System. (November 2001). *An Examination of K-5, 6-8 Versus K-8 Grade Configurations*. A research study conducted for the new Board of School Commissioners by the Division of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability.
- <sup>58</sup>. N. Anderson, "Maryland schools show gains on test scores," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2005, p. A01.
- <sup>59</sup>. N. Trejos, "Scores are up in state testing," *Washington Post*, *Montgomery Extra*, June 9, 2005, p. T03.
- <sup>60</sup>. For more information regarding CEP, go to <http://www.communityeducationpartners.com>. To learn more about the role of this program in the Philadelphia school district, see "Philadelphia vows tougher discipline in schools," S. Snyder, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 4, 2002, available online at <http://www.communityeducationpartners.com/newssep4-02.asp>.
- <sup>61</sup>. P.S. George, "Education 2000: Which way the middle school?" *The Clearing House*, vol. 62 (September 1988), p. 14.
- <sup>62</sup>. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1943), book one, chapter five.
- <sup>63</sup>. See: "Outstanding student performance," KIPP DC: KEY Academy press release (June 12, 2005); "No shortcuts: KIPP DC students spend twice as many hours on the basics, and it shows," *Forbes* (November 10, 2003); and Wingert and Kantrowitz, "At the top pf the class: KIPP programs could revolutionize charter schools in poor districts—if they just keep their grades up," *Newsweek* (March 24, 2003), p. 52.
- <sup>64</sup>. Ben Chavis, "Closing the Gap: American Indian Public Charter School: Destroying the Academic Achievement Gap Myth among Minority Students," *The Charter Journal*, p. 28, (March 2005).
- <sup>65</sup>. D. Clark, V. Petzko, S. Lucas & J. Valentine, "Research Findings from the 2000 National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools," paper presented at the National Middle School Association annual conference, Washington, D.C.,

(November 1, 2001). See pages 5-6.

- <sup>66.</sup> *Qualifications of the Public School Teacher Workforce: Prevalence of Out-of-Field Teaching 1987-88 to 1999-2000*. (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).
- <sup>67.</sup> T. Loveless, (November 2004). *The 2004 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?* The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>68.</sup> See G.R. Whitehurst, "Research on Teacher Preparation and Professional Development," a speech presented at the White House Conference on Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers (March 5, 2002), available online: [www.ed.gov/inits/preparingteachersconference/whitehurst.html](http://www.ed.gov/inits/preparingteachersconference/whitehurst.html).
- <sup>69.</sup> S. Snyder & D. Mezzacappa, "Teachers come up short in testing." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, (March 23, 2004).
- <sup>70.</sup> Cliff Adelman, *Answers in the Toolbox: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, (1999), pp. 84-85.
- <sup>71.</sup> "Significant Characteristics of Late Childhood and Early Adolescence," a document distributed by the Blue Earth, Minnesota school district, April 5, 2005. The excerpt is taken from the section labeled "Intellectual Development." See also M. Fedderson, "Yecke clarifies middle school issues," *Fairmont Sentinel*, June 9, 2005.

# From the Introduction to Mayhem in the Middle

Middle-schoolism is dead. May it rest in peace.

Let me be clear: Middle schools—that is, educational institutions that house students in grades 6, 7, 8, and sometimes 5—are alive and kicking. This grade level organization, while challenging in some respects, is capable of producing wonderful academic achievement, as we see in such stellar middle schools as the KIPP academies.

It is the middle school *concept*, the notion that middle schools should be havens of socialization and not academies of knowledge, that has met its Waterloo—though the fervent partisans of middle schoolism do not yet realize it.

This report joins a swelling chorus of individuals and organizations that are calling for advocates of the middle school “concept” to wave the white flag, surrender peacefully, and go home. It will cover the history of the middle school movement, the growth and ultimate ascendancy of the middle school “concept,” and how a number of communities have successfully, and at no great cost, transitioned back to the traditional K-8 model.

—Cheri Pierson Yecke

*Former Minnesota Commissioner of Education*

Compact  
Guides to  
Education  
Solutions

This series from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute provides practical solutions to K-12 education problems for policy makers, legislators, school leaders, and activists. These concise guides are meant to help drive reforms at the local, state, and national levels by offering actionable policy recommendations.

