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The J. McDonald Williams Institute, research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, is dedicated to conducting non-partisan outcomes research and public policy evaluation related to comprehensive community revitalization of low-income urban areas.

Grade-Span Configurations: What Should We Do With the Children?

BY

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FCE

If your child is known by every single teacher in the building, if you have a relationship of nine years' duration, if you have that kind of focus and intensity, is that not better than when your children are sent to a more distant school with larger numbers?

— Colorado Education Commissioner William Moloney (Sanko, 1995)

Schools today are faced with a seemingly endless number of decisions regarding how to teach and care for children. These decisions affect students in countless ways, from curricular scope and sequence to social and emotional development. Education must be handled with care so that children grow up to be productive citizens instead of burdens to society. Decisions such as choosing principals, hiring teachers, and ensuring the safety of students are obviously the highest priorities. Additionally, school officials must make decisions about issues such as when school will begin and end each day, what the cafeteria will serve for lunch, and what will be taught. One decision appears to be superficial, yet is vital to consider for students' success—which grade levels will be housed in a particular school.

Grade-span configuration can affect children's academic achievement as well as their social and emotional well-being. Although relatively little research on grade-span configurations has been documented (Grade-span configurations, 2005; Renchler, n.d.), that which has been has focused on either discarding the middle school or preserving it. It is my intent to demonstrate that a kindergarten through eighth grade grade-span

configuration is best for students because of the resulting improvements in academic achievement, attendance, and behavior.

HISTORY OF GRADE-SPAN CONFIGURATIONS

Free public education became mandatory in most states by 1918 (Thattai, n.d.). For years, many students attended one school for kindergarten through 12th grade. Then, as populations rose and studies in education suggested alternative arrangements, students were divided into two schools—one housing kindergarten through eighth grade and one comprised of ninth through twelfth grade. In the 1920s, 80% of high school graduates had attended two schools containing different grade levels (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

Later studies indicated that children in the middle grades needed more specialized attention (Paglin & Fager, 1997). The development of the junior high school occurred as a result. The purpose of the junior high school was to prepare students for high school, and departmentalized classes were successful in meeting this objective. By 1960, 80% of students attended three schools of differing grade spans—most often consisting of kindergarten through sixth grade, seventh through ninth grade, and tenth through twelfth grade (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

Research later found that the junior high school configuration created an environment too much like high school, a climate for which the early teen age group was not developmentally ready. In the 1980s, it was replaced by the middle school, comprised mainly of the sixth through eighth grades. The middle school setting was thought to be more child-centered than that of the junior high school (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Today, more

than 9 million children attend middle school (Rand Corporation, 2004). Most children attend three schools—one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school.

MIDDLE SCHOOL CONCEPT

The middle school concept, which took the place of the junior high configuration, was based on the unique needs of adolescents, who many thought should be kept separate from children of other ages (Cromwell, 1999). This age group, typically considered to include the 10- to 14-year-old age span, is “changing physically, emotionally and intellectually faster than at any other time in his or her life” (Ecker, 2002). In fact, only as infants do children change more quickly than they do in early adolescence (Carnegie Corporation, 1995).

The middle school environment utilizes different concepts that make the learning experience optimal for this age group. One concept that is commonly implemented is interdisciplinary teaming. In interdisciplinary teaming, three or more teachers from different disciplines instruct the same group of students for the majority of the day. In order to be effective, interdisciplinary teaming should involve a common planning time so that teachers can prepare thematic units together (Flowers et al., 1999). During planning, they can also discuss issues involving curriculum, individual students’ needs, and any other concerns that arise. A prerequisite for positive interdisciplinary teaming is the teachers’ abilities to work together as a team. The teachers of one middle school, which had the second highest scores in its district, refused to make decisions about children or other topics unless the whole team was present (Wilson et al., 2000).

Middle schools may also utilize concepts such as exploratory courses, block scheduling, and extracurricular activities.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Nationwide focus on the achievement gap between different ethnic groups as a result of

the No Child Left Behind legislation has led many school districts to examine which students are most successful, which are least successful, and why. One of the many discoveries has been that students are losing a significant amount of academic achievement when they enter a school of a different grade span, usually around the sixth grade and again in the ninth or tenth grade (Renchler, n.d.).

In the state of Georgia, less than half of middle schools had a satisfactory student pass rate on the state exam (Stuck in the Middle, 2004). The Third International Math and Science Study showed that students in the fourth through eighth grades declined significantly in math and science (Landrum, 2002). Former Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley stated in 1998 that, in regard to math and science, “we begin to drift in the middle years” (Pardini, 2002).

Student achievement in other subjects is not any more promising. In 1994, only 28% of eighth graders nationally were considered proficient in reading (Carnegie Corporation, 1995), and in 2005, The Nation’s Report Card (2005) revealed that only 29% of eighth graders were considered proficient or advanced in reading. Middle school has been regarded as a “weak link in American schooling” (Schouten, 2002).

With the current accountability system, school districts cannot afford to have a lack of achievement counted against them, often resulting in the loss of funding or even sanctions such as school closure. Therefore, middle school grade levels have been examined more closely to identify the reason for the disparities in student achievement rates at schools with different grade spans.

Research has found lower student achievement at the middle school level as well as more discipline problems. Perhaps one of the most comprehensive reports conducted about middle schools was done in 2004 by the Rand Corporation. In its findings, a number of problems were uncovered, including those related to academic progress, parental

support, transitioning to a new school, lack of implementation of the middle school concept, and lack of teacher training in middle schools (Rand Corporation, 2004).

Advancing to new campuses causes a great deal of stress for children, which increases with each additional school transition (Grade-Span Configurations, 2005). School transitions are so traumatic to children that students' chances of completely dropping out escalate with each additional move (Schroeder, 1999). Many students transitioning to new schools worry about whether they will get lost, if they will be able to get to class on time during passing periods as they move from room to room, and what will be expected of them (Elias, 2001). They often encounter a place that has higher expectations, is less child-friendly, and is less familiar.

Finally, students have a new environment to get used to with a new set of friends and teachers (Elias, 2001). The students in the lowest grade become "the new kid on the block" and wonder if they will be bullied by older children (Schumacher, 1998). Adolescents going through these changes experience "social isolation" (Stuck in the Middle, 2004). Barbara Byrd-Bennett, CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District in Ohio, believes that when students are focused on these fears, they are less focused on academics (Spector, 2000). Delmonte and Sikes (2005) wrote that the adolescent years are a "challenging time," but that the schools with kindergarten through eighth grade structure create some stability.

Parents are not pleased with middle schools because they view them as unsafe. In 2005, St. Louis Public Schools District Superintendent Creg Williams considered converting some middle schools to schools made up of kindergarten through the eighth grade due to parent requests (Stevens, 2005). One district noticed that parents were so unhappy with middle schools and worried about discipline problems that enrollment declined 50% at the end of elementary school (Delisio, 2003). Large school districts, such as those of Baltimore, Cincinnati, Oklahoma City, and Milwaukee, cite parental dissatisfaction with

the middle schools as a primary reason for their conversions (Delmonte & Sikes, 2005).

Parents are not the only ones who view the middle school as unsafe. According to the Rand's report on the condition of middle schools, students themselves worry about their own safety (Rand Corporation, 2004). That research suggests this anxiety can have a negative effect on academic achievement because learning is secondary to the trauma experienced when fearing physical harm.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS TRANSITIONING TO KINDERGARTEN THROUGH EIGHTH GRADE SCHOOLS

Several school districts have attempted to address the problems found in their middle schools by adjusting grade-span configurations to implement the kindergarten through eighth grade structure. Critics say that these changes have been made without thoroughly investigating the success or demise of the kindergarten through eighth grade arrangement, nor considering improving middle schools by enforcing the elements that comprise the objectives of the middle school concept. They also contend that changing grade-span configuration masks the root problems of schools, such as ineffective teaching.

Jack Berckemeyer, Assistant Executive Director for the National Middle School Association, said that "people look for a quick fix" (Delisio, 2003). Sue Swaim (2005), Executive Director for the National Middle School Association, said that changing the school structure is not the answer. However, the districts that have made the change—Cleveland, Cincinnati, Oklahoma City, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Milwaukee, and others—performed pilot studies or other research prior to altering a large number of their schools. The districts were pleased with the research findings (Pardini, 2002).

HIGHER ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Barbara Byrd-Bennett, during her first year as CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District,

classified the city's middle schools as "troubled" and "failing" (Spector, 2000). This prompted her decision to move the district's schools to a kindergarten through eighth grade configuration, beginning with four schools.

Scores on the Ohio Proficiency Test in the four kindergarten through eighth grade pilot schools were considerably higher than the district average for middle schools (Spector, 2000). In 2003, 58% of sixth graders at the kindergarten through eighth grade schools achieved a proficient score in reading, compared to 43% in the middle schools (Denver Public Schools, 2004). Math scores were also more favorable in the kindergarten through eighth grade schools than in the sixth through eighth grade schools, with 44% and 30% scoring proficient ratings, respectively. As a result, Cleveland became convinced of the benefits of the new grade-span configuration and now has more than 20 kindergarten through eighth grade campuses (Pardini, 2002).

In Philadelphia, after adjustments for poverty and race factors were made, tests showed that eighth graders in kindergarten through eighth grade schools scored higher on the SAT-9 and state exams and received better grades in their classes than their counterparts in middle schools (Denver Public Schools, 2004). Philadelphia also found in its study that students from high poverty level areas fared better in kindergarten through eighth grade schools than in middle schools (Denver Public Schools, 2004).

Students in kindergarten through eighth grade schools in Baltimore scored "significantly higher" on the CTB TerraNova test in reading, language arts, and math than those in the elementary and middle schools (Denver Public Schools, 2004). Additionally, eighth graders in K-8 configurations in Pittsburgh had higher reading and math scores on the PSSA in 2003 (Newhouse, 2004). Another district, New Orleans, boasted higher scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for 6th and 7th graders at kindergarten through eighth grade schools than those in the middle schools.

BETTER ATTENDANCE

Lack of parental involvement has been a chief complaint of educators across the country, particularly in urban districts with more children who are from unstable homes, live in poverty, or are in environments where English is the second language. Ironically, in their comprehensive report, the Rand Corporation found that middle schools made fewer efforts to involve parents than elementary schools did (Rand Corporation, 2004).

Byrd-Bennett, CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District, said that the implementation of the kindergarten through eighth grade configuration was an attempt to "counteract the effects of unstable homes, high mobility and lack of parental involvement" (Spector, 2000). She felt that by keeping siblings together in the same school, parents would have to make only one stop for all siblings for school functions such as parent conferences and open houses. In addition, parents would be able to pick up and drop off most, if not all, of their children at one campus. Also, most elementary schools are located closer to students' homes, making it easier for parents to be involved due to proximity. From a parent's perspective, having all children attend one school is better than having them attend different schools, including a middle school—often a school with more students that is farther away from the home (Cromwell, 1999).

Kindergarten through eighth grade schools are considered more family oriented than other configurations (Delisio, 2003). William J. Moloney, Colorado Education Commissioner, stated that kindergarten through eighth grade schools help build long relationships between parents, students, and school staff because the students stay in the same school for 9 years (Cromwell, 1999). This sense of community is disrupted in schools with fewer grades because students stay at the school for less time (Renchler, n.d.).

Kathleen Ware, former Associate Superintendent for Cincinnati Public Schools, said that parents liked the conversion to the

kindergarten through eighth grade structure so much that she “[didn’t] think they would give it up” (Pardini, 2002).

Districts who underwent the transformation to kindergarten through eighth grade schools stated that active parental involvement was present longer (Denver Public Schools, 2004). Furthermore, the level of parental involvement correlated to student attendance. In schools where parents were highly involved, students had higher attendance rates. For example, in Cincinnati Public Schools and other districts, students are attending school more regularly (Pardini, 2002).

IMPROVED BEHAVIOR

Behavior was one reason for the proposed conversion to the kindergarten through eighth grade organization in the Cleveland Municipal School District. During the 1999-2000 school year the suspension rate for middle schools was higher than at high schools and much higher than it was at elementary schools (Spector, 2000). In fact, many of the middle schools in Cleveland had extreme discipline problems, to the point that 28 out of 40 teachers at one school called in sick one day due to safety concerns (Spector, 2000).

One of the arguments of middle school supporters and critics of kindergarten through eighth grade configurations is that children in middle school are going through rapid hormonal changes and that they should be separated from other children in an environment where staff members understand their unique needs. They contend that it is unwise to group eighth graders in the same school with kindergarteners because of the belief that older students’ behaviors could be detrimental to younger students. However, the Rand Corporation (2004) found no “scientific evidence” to indicate middle school children should be kept separate in their own building.

In fact, studies show that older students are actually *better* behaved when housed with younger students because they are expected to be role models (Delisio, 2003). Acting as role models gives students reason to act appropriately

(Cromwell, 1999). Kathleen Ware, former Associate Superintendent of Cincinnati Public Schools, said that students placed in the middle school structure not only have no role models to look up to, but also have no one for whom to serve as role models (Delisio, 2003). Cincinnati Public Schools, which now has 59 kindergarten through eighth grade schools, encourages older children to mentor younger ones.

One school district reported 59% fewer discipline problems with seventh graders in their kindergarten through eighth grade schools (Delisio, 2003). Kindergarten through eighth grade environments have been found to be more regimented, a climate which adolescent students need (Cromwell, 1999). Shuronia Jacox, principal of a Baltimore school that converted to the kindergarten through eighth grade configuration, said the “young teens don’t act up as much” (Gerwertz, 2004). Research also shows that adolescents were less likely to conform to peer pressure in kindergarten through eighth grade schools (Cromwell, 1999).

TRANSITIONING TO ANOTHER SCHOOL

Some schools have not considered grade-span reconfigurations or have chosen not to reconfigure. In light of this position, school districts must understand the difficulties faced by students when progressing to new schools as well as the schools’ role in easing the transition (Schumacher, 1998).

First, transitional buffers should begin before advancement takes place while the students are still in the last grade of the current school. Students should visit their new schools at least once by school-arranged bus trips during the spring of the school year before the transition. Students’ familiarity with the new school should be developed as much as possible prior to the move by explaining the rules and expectations of the school, showing important locations around the campus, and introducing the teachers and staff.

Specifically, counselors should be introduced and well-known so that students feel comfortable

confiding in them. Parents should be oriented to the school as well, and special efforts should be made to encourage their future involvement. This goal could be accomplished by school activities and fundraisers, such as carnivals, school plays, and “Muffins for Moms” or “Donuts for Dads” events. Some schools hold classes for adults, such as English as a Second Language education or computer skills training.

Additionally, pairing new students with older “buddies” may help ease the transition anxiety (Elias, 2001). Mentors can help students become familiar with the school and help reduce the feelings of inferiority associated with being the “new kid on the block.”

Finally, all school personnel should remember that even though the children are older, they are still children and need guidance and nurturing. I have observed firsthand the treatment of children in middle schools by office personnel who were cold and discourteous. Their explanation was that the children are not in elementary school any longer and are not babies. This type of experience is likely to add to the anxiety children feel when attempting to adapt to a new environment.

CONCLUSION

Districts around the United States are desperately trying to improve school performance in a variety of ways. Some should be applauded for their efforts in raising academic achievement and closing the academic achievement gap. Schools are unable fix everything in regard to the lifestyles the children live, but schools can control their own structure.

Kindergarten through eighth grade schools have been outperforming middle schools, with higher academic achievement, better attendance, and fewer behavioral problems. Parents seem to favor them. There is value in the middle school concept, but school transitions contribute to a loss of academic achievement.

Furthermore, children, many of whom have lives full of change and unpredictability, need

more continuity. As Bill Johnson, Associate Superintendent of Student Performance of Greenville County, South Carolina, stated, “There are enough changes going on in students that age without making it worse with a huge environmental change” (Landrum, 2002).

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