A National Survey of Middle School Effectiveness

Data from 130 exemplary schools show that changing to middle school organization positively affects student achievement and personal development, learning climate, faculty morale, staff development, and parental and community involvement.

The middle school movement is one of the largest, most comprehensive efforts at educational reorganization in the history of American public schooling. Only the decades-long school consolidation process rivals it in terms of the number of school districts and students involved. Each year more districts open newly reorganized middle schools as alternatives to K-8, 7-9, 7-12, or other plans. Although decreasing enrollments have spurred a decline in the overall number of all types of middle level schools in the U.S., the number of identified middle schools continues to increase (NIE, 1983).

The lack of consistency used to evaluate the effectiveness of middle school programs—and the inconclusiveness of the available research—prompted us to conduct our own study in the fall of 1983. We invited central office staff members and school administrators in 34 states to supply data about the effects of implementing middle school programs in their districts.

We developed a list of reputedly exemplary middle schools from schools identified by (1) the 1982 Study of Well-Disciplined Schools sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa, (2) the 1983 DOE National Secondary School Recognition Program, (3) a panel of ten persons recognized as experts in middle school education, and (4) several lists from books on middle school education. Of the schools we contacted, 130 (81 percent) responded.



Photographs courtesy of Fred Neuton, North Middle School, Fort Campbell, Ky.

To ascertain the degree to which the programs of these schools could be deemed effective for the education of early adolescents, we asked each respondent to supply detailed information about the extent to which the school conformed to certain guidelines. For instance,

- Ninety percent organized teachers and students into interdisciplinary teams, rather than self-contained and departmentalized instruction.
- Ninety-four percent used flexible scheduling during the school day, often with some kind of block schedule.
- Ninety-three percent included a home base period and teacher-advisor for each student.
- All of the respondents said their programs were designed with the nature of middle school students in mind.
- Ninety-nine percent focused curriculum on students' personal development and skills for continued learning, and a wide range of exploratory activities.
- All reported that administrators and faculty members collaborated on decisions that shaped school policy.

These data indicate that the schools in this sample are characterized by the central components of the middle school philosophy. They are more than "middle" schools; they are schools that have achieved significant



North Middle School student Todd Meredith invites comments from classmates about their perceptions of his attitudes and behavior.

local, state, or national recognition by using a format that is relatively common.

Thus, our survey data apply most directly to other middle schools following that same format. We made no attempt to control or analyze data on the bases of socioeconomic status, school size, geographic location, or the influence of school leadership or talented instruction. Our conclusions are limited by the fact that we encouraged respondents to supply evidence regarding the positive effects of their middle school programs and not to stress negative aspects.

Student Achievement Rises

Our survey results dispute earlier opinions that academic achievement is either unaffected or only modestly improved by a move to middle school organization. Sixty-two percent of the respondents described consistent academic improvement. An additional 28 percent supplied specific results demonstrating increased scores on state assessment tests, the California Achievement Test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and similar tests. Eighty-five percent observed that teacher confidence in student abilities had increased, which, many suggested, led to higher expectations and greater student productivity. Other aspects of reorganized programs positively affecting student learning included coordination of skills and subjects by interdisciplinary teams as well as greater teacher awareness of preadolescent needs and abilities. Clearly, the experience of the most highly acclaimed middle schools is that academic achievement can be expected to improve following reorganization.

Discipline Problems Decrease

Reorganization improved discipline in almost every measurable manner. Tardiness and truancy decreased moderately or greatly according to a majority of respondents, as did school vandalism and theft. Approximately 80 percent noted a significant reduction in office referrals and suspensions, while close to 60 percent expelled fewer students after the transition. Almost 90 percent observed that teacher and staff confidence in managing disruptive students increased, diminishing involvement in discipline in many schools.

All the ancedotal evidence supported the positive effects of middle school programs on discipline. One-fourth of the respondents indicated that interdisciplinary team organization and grouping students in houses enabled teachers to develop consistent procedures for handling disruptions. Advisor-advisee programs and greater emphasis on school guidance improved communication and empathy between teachers and students, often defusing volatile emotions before they exploded in classroom confrontations. The cultivation of parental support in enforcing disciplinary actions greatly improved student behavior. Implementing highly structured discipline plans—such as Glasser's Reality Therapy and Canter's Assertive Discipline, which need teacher-teacher and teacher-administrator collaboration to be effective—was facilitated by staff development programs accompanying reorganization. Several respondents suggested that moving 9th graders to high schools left a group of younger adolescents more similar developmentally and generally less sophisticated and troublesome. When reoganization follows the pattern common to the schools administered by these respondents, educators and parents can expect a decrease in discipline problems.

Student Personal Development Is Enhanced

Certainly, one of the long-espoused goals of the middle school has been to focus on the unique nature and needs of young adolescents. Our results indicate that exemplary middle schools have been very successful in promoting student personal development. Over 80 percent of the respondents testified that student emotional health,

creativity, and confidence in self-directed learning were positively affected by reorganization. Over 90 percent believed that student self-concept and social development also benefited.

Not a single respondent reported negative effects on student personal development. The success of team organization and teacher-based guidance in helping individuals develop closer peer relationships was cited repeatedly. Extracurricular and intramural athletic activities were open to all students and invited greater student participation, interaction, and competition. Awards for leadership, good citizenship, and cooperation in and out of classes enabled those who weren't honor roll students or star athletes to experience the important satisfaction of peer recognition. Interdisciplinary teams, classroom guidance, and exploratory programs increased opportunities for student involvement and accomplishments, significantly improving student personal development.

Reorganization appeared to delay certain social pressures that seem to precipitate an undesirable sophistication in young people today. Schools can work with students before major growth spurts associated with puberty and help them adjust to new academic environments before problems develop. "No school-sponsored dances certainly delays the mating process!" quipped one respondent. Others conveyed strong parental support for their efforts to slow down preadolescent maturation.

Many respondents specifically attributed gains in student personal development to effective teacher guidance. A part of the original junior high concept, the classroom advisory group is making a strong comeback in reorganized middle schools. Although many respondents indicated that successful implementation was difficult, they praised its impact on helping students understand themselves and others during the trying time of early adolescence. When conceived and conducted with care, advisor-advisee programs appear gratifying to all involved.

School Learning Climate Turns Positive

Recent studies analyzing school effectiveness correlate learning climate with student behavior and achievement. Students who feel valued by teachers and view school as more than just a place to meet friends tend to show respect for their schools. The exemplary schools in this study developed programs that demonstrate persistent caring for students as young people and create a school environment to meet their special academic and personal needs. Predictably, respondents reported stronger school spirit since reorganization. Over 95 percent declared that students' attitudes toward school and feelings about teachers became moderately or strongly positive. Eighty-six percent witnessed greater student participation in special interest activities, while 75 percent noted better school attendance. Descriptions of student enthusiasm for involvement in school programs ran nearly five to one in favor of changes brought about by a move to middle school organization.

"Advisor-advisee programs and greater emphasis on school guidance improved communication and empathy between teachers and students, often defusing volatile emotions before they exploded in classroom confrontations."



Photograph by John Schroeder

In discussions of reorganizing in schools from junior high to middle schools, educators and citizens often express concern about the proper role of interscholastic competition, cheerleading, and athletic awards. Proponents of such activities argue that their elimination will negatively affect school spirit; opponents stress that their inclusion in schools will exclude most students from participation and recognition, weakening school spirit. Our survey results indicate that when curriculums are designed to encourage greater student involvement in different ways, removal or significant modification of interscholastic sports programs does not diminish student pride and positive feelings. Failure to compensate for altering conventional athletic competition during reorganization, however, can be costly to school pride.



Photograph by John Schroeder, Ferndale Middle School, High Point, North Carolina

The majority of respondents identified new activities that effectively replaced traditional ones in generating student excitement and participation. Advisory groups and interdisciplinary team programs successfully stimulated student involvement, as did offering intramurals, clubs, exploratory classes, and awards for effort and excellence. Several schools retained interscholastic sports and cheerleading by restructuring them to include more students or by shifting responsibility for them to community agencies allowed to use school facilities after hours.

Faculty Morale Improves

Because of the complexities of our education system and frequent criticism by parents, politicians, and the press, many public school teachers exhibit alarmingly but understandably low morale. Not so in the nation's exemplary middle schools. An impressive 94 percent of the respondents described staff morale and rapport as either moderately or strongly positive following reorganization. Based on formal and informal observations, 93 percent concluded that a move to middle school organization favorably influenced staff attitudes toward change, and 82 percent noticed increased staff participation in special interest activities following the transition. Over half of the respondents cited lower teacher absenteeism and turnover, noting that some teachers fought transfers to other schools. All anecdotal comments but one praised the benefits to morale of implementating a middle school philosophy. Teachers voiced greater job satisfaction, and said that they worked more closely with one another and spent more leisure time together.

Such positive faculty morale did not magically appear when the middle schools opened their doors. Some faculty members lacked enthusiasm for reorganization and resisted change efforts. A noticeable number of secondary-trained teachers thought that some of the new things they were expected

to do were unreasonable. As they enjoyed increased support on teams and more control over learning time, however, many skeptical teachers developed an appreciation for the appropriateness of middle school programs. Even those disillusioned with district policies and budgets, by a national clamor for educational reform, or with contract negotiations often conceded later that reorganization improved schooling and made their jobs more rewarding. One respondent's comment that it took ten years before his staff truly supported the middle school concept suggests that considerable patience may be a prerequisite for developing strong faculty morale. Other comments expressed concern about the life span of staff enthusiasm in middle schools, mentioning that some teachers could overextend themselves and lose interest within a few years if precautions were not taken.

Respondents reported that the interdisciplinary team organization component of the middle school program contributed greatly to staff morale. Previously isolated instructors became team members and developed the same sense of belonging and camaraderie they hoped to instill in their students. The flexibility in scheduling, which is inherent to team responsibility for a common group of students occupying generally the same area of the school, provided teachers with many options for instruction. Sharing knowledge of students and subjects increased their confidence and consistency.



Photographs by Roger Easton, Chinook Middle School, Lacey, Washington



Staff Development Is Effective

Reorganization to middle schools, according to respondents, provided ample opportunities for teachers, principals, and district administrators to coordinate efforts to improve instruction and classroom management by requiring extensive staff development programs. Acknowledging that some teachers are more responsive to change than others and that staff members can occasionaly be worn down by too much inservice, administrators nonetheless noted greater staff development in designing and executing philosophy, curriculum, and objectives when they conducted staff development programs to facilitate reorganization. Inservice programs (characteristics of young adolescents, interdisciplinary teams, advisory-advisee groups) and educational improvement programs applicable to all grades (Effective Schooling, Instruction Theory Into Practice, Assertive Discipline, Reality Therapy) provided middle school staff with research findings and practices that can revitalize teaching and learning in these crucial grades. Most schools in the survey assessed teachers' needs and interests prior to, during, and after the transition; enlisted the aid of local universities and colleges when possible; encouraged individual and group attendance to state and national conferences about middle school education; and scheduled dozens of inservice workshops to improve instruction.

Parental Involvement and Support Strengthens

Survey respondents proudly described the positive parental involvement and support they experienced after reorganization to middle schools. They cited better attendance at open houses, conferences, and PTA meetings, as well as a greater propensity to volunteer as chaperones for field trips, dances, or other school socials; to help in libraries, cafeterias, and classrooms; to coach intramural athletics; and to teach minicourses in many of the ex-



Photograph by John Schroeder

"Reorganization appeared to delay certain social pressures that seem to precipitate an undesirable sophistication in young people today."

emplary middle schools. Administrators cultivated parental involvement during all stages of the transition, anticipating the potential value of their contributions and support. They took pains to explain why and how reorganization would improve schooling for their children and established communication channels that encouraged parents to ask questions and to make suggestions at any point in the reorganization process.

Administrators sought to capitalize on parental willingness to share responsibility for their children's education and were well rewarded for their efforts. One respondent boasted that parents told him, "You cannot change your program until my last child has gone through it!" and "My child likes school for the first time." Parents often voiced support for the middle school at board meetings and frequently voted to provide the money needed to maintain the level of educational services characteristic of exemplary middle schools.

Community Involvement and Coverage Is Favorable

Admitting that community concern for the cost of public education can spell financial trouble for reorganization programs—particularly those that require money to provide facilities and retrain staff—our respondents nonetheless reported favorable community support. Businesses, civic organizations, and community leaders resemble parents in their willingness to contribute to the schooling of middle level students. They attend and present assemblies, fund-raising events, and career awareness programs, thus generating and diffusing valuable support for the middle school throughout the community. People with and without children in the schools volunteer

to cover classes, tutor exceptional students, and sponsor clubs, according to many administrators in our survey. "All we have to do is ask!" wrote one about his community's eagerness to help in the school. Other administrators related that although they would like to have even more community involvement and support, they were generally pleased with existing levels.

High School Staff Perceptions Moderate

In stark contrast to the strong vote of confidence given to middle school reorganization by parents, teachers, and surrounding communities, support wavered among high school staff. Barely half of the respondents from middle schools surveyed reported praise and approval from the upper grade teachers to whom they sent students. Most added that to earn support they had to overcome earlier suspicions and fears voiced by high school teachers who doubted the seriousness of middle school programs. Many acknowledged district emphasis on K-12 curriculum and articulation as very helpful in establishing positive reputations and relations with high schools. A few noted that reorganization inspired some high school teachers to improve their programs by implementing 9th grade interdisciplinary teams and by maintaining the close parent-teacher-student contact developed in the middle grades. Some respondents indicated great pride when told by senior high staff that the middle schools must be doing something right since students were well prepared for their final school years. However, even this group who receive favorable support from their secondary counterparts expressed difficulty in pleasing high school personnel.

The other 46 percent of respondents reported criticism, fickle support, or apathy toward their programs on the part of the high school staff. Often high school teachers said that only those in the upper grades really teach and that it would be a step down to teach in middle school. The absence of ability grouping and interscholastic athletics was thought to disrupt high school programs, eliciting more negative comments. If reorganization moved 9th graders to high schools, contributed to overcrowding, or required a reallocation of funds previously designated for the high school, many high school instructors appeared to be quick to disregard any merit assigned to a program based on preadolescent needs. Many respondents suggested that schools at all levels should work hard to improve communication and cooperation. A few proposed reassigning district teachers to different buildings and grades more often and encouraging K-12 articulation to promote positive feelings among schools.

Dramatically Positive Results

The results of our survey indicate that highly successful middle schools have very similar programs, which tend to conform to the recommendations in the literature of middle level education in the last half century. Such programs are distinctly different from those common to elementary and high schools. When implemented in this way, the results are dramatically positive in terms of academic achievement, student behavior, school learning climate, faculty morale, and staff development.□

Reference

National Institute of Education. *A Study of the Demography of Schools for Early Adolescents*. Washington, D.C.: U.S.D.O.E., Statistical Information Office, 1983.

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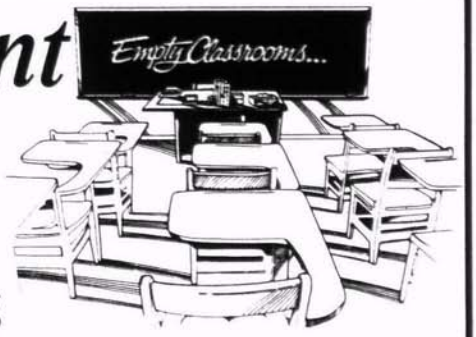

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