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OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT**

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TO: School Board Members

FROM: Katherine Blask, Ph.D., Associate Superintendent
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VIA: James F. Notter
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SUBJECT: **MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION AND K-8 MODELS**

The attached Information Brief presents an overview of the empirical and theoretical research regarding middle level education, especially issues related to middle school as compared to Kindergarten through eighth (K-8) grade configurations. Recent trends related to middle level grade configuration in the United States (U.S.) are also discussed.

No research to date has definitively answered the question of whether young adolescents register higher academic achievement in K-8 schools than they do in middle schools. Researchers caution that the K-8 grade configuration is not, in and of itself, a solution and sound educational practices are more important to student achievement than grade span. Factors beyond grade configuration that have been related to outcomes for young adolescent students include school size, grade size, school environment and history, teacher preparation, characteristics of students and the community, student preparation for school transitions, school relationships with families and communities, and transition strategies for school districts making a grade configuration change.

The reviewed literature highlights the importance of distinguishing the results of empirical research from anecdotal case studies and the need for research that disentangles the possible interactions between grade configurations and other factors. Questions or comments concerning this Information Brief should be directed to **me at 754-321-2470 or Dr. Russell Clement, Director, Research Services at 754-321-2500.**

JFN/KAB/RWC:gks
Attachment

cc: Executive Leadership Team
Area Directors
Joel Smith, Director, Middle Schools

Information Brief



Middle School Education and K-8 Models

The question of the optimal configuration of grades for Kindergarten through grade 12 schooling, especially as related to middle level education, is not new. Two 1998 publications (Bradley, 1998; Tucker & Coddling, 1998) stand out in calling attention to the unsatisfactory outcomes of middle school students, which has led to a reassessment of the middle school configuration in the United States (Pardini, 2002).

While there are limited achievement and behavioral data that are available which suggest that Kindergarten through grade eight (K-8) schools can be more successful than middle schools in improving student performance, researchers caution that the K-8 grade configuration is not a magic bullet (Elovitz, 2007) and sound educational practices are more important to student achievement than grade span (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Research further suggests that student achievement increases are related to the number of middle school philosophy components that are effectively implemented in schools (Ohio Middle School Association, 2005).

This brief presents an overview of the empirical and theoretical research regarding middle level education, especially issues related to middle school versus K-8 grade configurations. Recent trends related to middle level grade configuration in the United States (U.S.) are also discussed.

Middle Level Education

The mission of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), along with a number of other organizations, is to facilitate the educational experience and healthy growth of these students. An NMSA (2003a) position paper, *This We Believe*, delineates the concept of middle level education along with the characteristics that define a successful middle school culture and programmatic components that can support that culture. Companion volumes present summaries of research on programmatic components (NMSA, 2003b) and a comprehensive overview of what effective middle level education should look like (NMSA, 2005).

In recent years, several researchers have provided an overview of adolescent education (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003; Mizell, 2005; Paglin & Fager, 1997), which outlined the history of the K-8 configuration, the rise of the junior high configuration (grades seven to nine), the shift to the middle school configuration (grades six to eight), and the current interest in a return to K-8 schools. The Florida Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (2005) issued a report addressing the extent to which school districts in other states were moving to a K-8 model, the reasons for change, the evidence for success of K-8 schools, and what might be learned from the experiences of other states. Issues related to grade configuration have been addressed by a number of researchers (e.g., Look, 2001;

Pardini, 2002; Spetrino, Hauser, & Anderson, 2006) and include which grades should be grouped together, school size, community characteristics (particularly urban vs. rural communities and poverty level), and the number and impact of transitions on students.

A number of organizations and networks are dedicated to the success of middle level students in the U.S. These include the NMSA, MiddleWeb, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. The latter showcases eight different middle school reform models currently being implemented, and evaluated, across the country (<http://www.mgforum.org/>). The models include: AIM at Middle-Grades Results, Different Ways of Knowing, Making Middle Grades Work, Making Schools Work, Middle Start, Success for All Middle School Program, Talent Development Middle School Model, and Turning Points. The models share the common goal of seeking to inspire change across all aspects of schools including organization and climate; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; professional development; leadership; and parent/community involvement (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, n.d.) The various models are supported or endorsed by organizations that include the U.S. Department of Education, Education Development Center, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Galef Institute, SREB, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Academy for Educational Development, and the National Opinion Research Council. A number of states and universities have also provided funding and/or logistic support to the various programs.

Anfara and Lipka (2003) provide a comprehensive review of the research relating the middle school concept to student achievement. These authors delineate the issues involved in this investigation and note a promising body of research suggesting that the fidelity of implementation of the middle school concept is related to student achievement. That is, successful implementation of middle school programs and practices is associated with positive outcomes for students. These authors also highlight the research indicating that socioeconomic status (SES), specifically the impoverished learning environments often found in lower SES communities, is the most significant factor related to student achievement.

Middle Schools versus K-8 Schools

Although there are a number of different grade configurations that exist in U.S. schools today, the two most common are middle schools that serve students in grades six through eight, while a K-8 school is a school where students progress from Kindergarten through eighth grade at a single location. A K-8 configuration is the norm for private schools (religious and secular) and is popular overseas (Pardini, 2002). K-8 schools are expected to utilize developmentally appropriate instructional models for both the elementary and middle grade levels (Spetrino, Hauser, & Anderson, 2006). It has been suggested that ideal “elemiddle” schools are those that include both primary and middle grades with a specific focus on the implementation of effective programs, including co-curricular activities, at the middle level (Pardini, 2002). Within this setting, students receive the additional nurturing associated with a traditional elementary setting, while also being prepared for a smooth transition to high school.

Reports of the challenges facing the education of middle school students in the U.S. have garnered a great deal of attention and initiated research and discussion regarding a number of contributing factors (e.g., Bradley, 1998; Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2006, 2008; Pardini, 2002; Tucker & Coddling, 1998). Cheri Pierson Yecke (2005), Florida's former Chancellor of K-12 Education, has coined the term "middle schoolism" to describe the philosophy that has focused more on personal adjustment than on education, which she surmises has resulted in limited middle school achievement. That author notes that, regardless of grade configuration, in order for schools to be successful in the education of young adolescents, they must return to educational methodologies that are based on "high academic standards, a coherent curriculum, effective instruction, strong leadership, results-based accountability, and sound discipline" (p. 47). Yecke's contention that grade configuration alone cannot account for students' success or failure is also endorsed by the NMSA and a number of educators and researchers (e.g., Elovitz, 2007; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Ohio Middle School Association, 2005). However, reports of increased achievement in K-8 schools, compared to middle schools, appear to have sparked a renewed movement toward K-8 schools in a number of urban districts, despite the cautions of the research community that this should not be seen as a quick fix.

Proponents of K-8 schools cite a number of empirical and theoretical studies that report advantages (e.g., Look, 2001; Pardini, 2002; Spetrino et al., 2006) including increased student achievement, increased parent and principal satisfaction, a more nurturing environment, more leadership opportunities for students, and reductions in the costs of building and maintenance. Pardini contends that elementary teachers bring a student-centered approach to their teaching, while middle school teachers tend to be more content-oriented. Retaining the middle grades in the elementary setting facilitates the extension of the student-centered approach into the middle grades. Proponents of middle schools claim that these advantages are also realized in successful middle schools (e.g., Elovitz, 2007; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Ohio Middle School Association, 2005). Elovitz (2007) addressed the theoretical issues related to K-8 schools and middle schools and contends that the grade configuration of a school (i.e., whether a middle school stands alone or as a component of a K-8) is not a magic bullet. He argues that it is the philosophy and practices of the school that are important and contends that students can succeed in any grade arrangement if the curriculum, programs, and instructional delivery system is appropriate. This opinion is consistent with the views of the NMSA (2005) which claims that it is the implementation of effective programs and practices, not grade configuration, which determines the quality of schools.

In regard to discipline, advocates of middle schools, as opposed to K-8 schools, propose that adolescent students ages 12 and 13 have behavioral issues that differ from those of elementary students. Discipline problems in this student group are often different than those seen in elementary students, and it is argued that the needs of these adolescent students can be best met in a setting that is separate from the elementary setting and in a larger student population (Cromwell, 1999). However, K-8 advocates cite recent studies as evidence of non-support for the middle school configuration. Arcia (2007) examined suspensions among sixth- and seventh-grade students across three transition groups: (1) grade six in elementary/K-8 and grade seven in K-8, (2) grade six in elementary/K-8 and grade seven in middle school, and (3) grades six and seven in middle school. Results indicated that, across race/ethnicity, achievement, and grade six suspension history, students in middle schools were suspended at higher rates than

students in elementary/K-8 schools. In a similar study, Cook et al. (2006) reported that, even when adjusted for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of students and schools, sixth grade students attending middle schools are more likely to be cited for discipline problems, compared to those attending an elementary school. In addition, the increased discipline rates in middle school sixth graders persisted at least through ninth grade. The authors propose that sixth grade students are at a particularly impressionable age and that the exposure to older peers and the increased freedom in middle schools may contribute to behavior problems.

Studies of student achievement in K-8 schools, compared to middle schools, yield no clear cut conclusion. Alspaugh (1998) reported increased high school dropout rates in districts with middle schools, compared to districts with K-8 schools. Cook et al. (2008) reported end-of-grade test scores that were higher in grade six students in K-8 as opposed to middle schools. In a similar study, Byrnes and Ruby (2007) compared the achievement of 40,883 eighth-grade students in 95 schools, comparing middle schools to long-standing K-8 schools and newer K-8 schools. Students in older K-8 schools performed significantly better than middle schools and newer K-8 schools, with the advantage explained by different student and teacher populations, average grade size, and the transition for those students who moved into a middle school setting from elementary schools. Offenber (2001) also reported data showing that students attending K-8 schools registered higher reading, mathematics, and science achievement, compared to students attending middle schools that served similar communities. It was suggested that the number of students in a grade (vs. school size) contributed to the difference in outcomes for these groups. Cook et al. (2006, 2008) contend that achievement data favoring K-8 schools, in conjunction with the discipline data, provide a strong argument for separating sixth graders from older adolescents. However, Offenber (2001) also identified a number of successful middle schools, suggesting that it is possible to foster successful student achievement in a middle school environment. Similarly, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) investigated eighth-grade student outcomes in middle schools, compared to K-8 schools in a single urban school district. Although few differences by school type were reported, self-esteem, which facilitates academic outcomes, was one benefit realized by eighth-grade middle school students, compared to their peers in K-8 settings. Middle school advocates also contend that the middle school setting is more conducive to offering a sufficient variety of curricular and extra-curricular options, which is necessary to foster student success (e.g., Cromwell, 1999).

A number of researchers have addressed the nature of the achievement loss associated with the transitions to middle school and high school. Alspaugh (1998) reported a statistically significant achievement loss in students who transitioned to middle school, compared to students in K-8 schools with no transition. The loss in achievement was reportedly larger when students from multiple elementary schools merged into a single middle school. Both K-8 and middle school students experienced achievement loss in the transition to high school, but the loss was increased in the middle school students, compared to K-8 students. Theoretical research on school transitions has addressed both the characteristics of the school and the characteristics of the individual. Mullins and Irvin (2000) summarized the research on the effects of the transition from elementary school to middle school on young adolescents, and contend that transition issues arise from a mismatch between the needs of young adolescent students and the school environment. McDougall and Hymel (1998) proposed that there are individual differences in the adjustment to school transitions and the circumstances of the individual must also be addressed. While the research does indicate that achievement drops during periods of transition, researchers

suggest that developmentally responsive schools and a well-designed transition plan can reduce the adverse effects for students (Coldarci & Hancock, 2002; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; NMSA, 2002; Paglin & Fager, 1997). The middle school reform program, Making Middle Grades Work (SREB, n.d.), focuses specifically on the student transition between middle and high school.

Implementation Issues for New K-8 Schools

A number of approaches for the establishment of K-8 schools where they did not previously exist have been attempted. The most popular strategy is to build up an elementary school by adding a grade each year, so that one year's fifth grade students will be the first class to continue all the way through eighth grade. Some schools may "work backward" by adding lower grades to a middle school one grade each year until it is K-8.

Some schools have opted to transition over a single summer from elementary to a K-8. In an effort to promote achievement and discipline at the middle school level, the superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools closed seven middle schools and shifted students in grades six, seven, and eight to 10 elementary schools converted from a K-5 to K-8 configuration (Smydo, 2006). In this instance, Pittsburgh's new K-8 schools reported a significant increase in behavioral issues which was highly disruptive during the schools' first year of the transition. Students moved from a middle school setting to an elementary setting were unhappy with the perceived "demotion," and the efforts to keep younger students separated from older students were not always successful (Smydo, 2007).

Pardini (2002) suggested that superintendents interested in returning to the K-8 model should begin with a single school in need of improvement, as opposed to the initiation of a districtwide initiative. The author notes that district administrators, teachers, parents, and community members should be involved in a discussion that is focused on the data.

Trend Data

While most young adolescents in the United States today still attend middle schools, many urban districts are considering a move back to K-8 configurations to combat achievement and discipline problems in the nation's middle schools, despite the lack of conclusive evidence that a K-8 configuration alone can guarantee success (Elovitz, 2007). The Washington Post reported that Washington, DC and nearby Prince George's County are considering a plan to convert from middle school configurations to K-8 (Haynes, 2007). This trend is evident in recent years across a number of urban districts, including Baltimore, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Oklahoma City, Newark, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and New York, which have been converting elementary schools into K-8 schools, while phasing out middle schools (Haynes, 2007; Haynes, & Labbé, 2008; Hernandez, 2007; Jan, 2004; K-8 schools, 2005). In 2002, Fayetteville, Tennessee, a rural community 90 miles south of Nashville was reported as having every middle school student in a K-8 setting (Schouten, 2002). Also in 2002, USA Today reported that Colorado and Tennessee were exploring the viability of a transition to K-8 (Schouten, 2002). In 2004, the Boston Globe (Jan, 2004) reported that Boston was also moving away from the traditional middle school in favor of K-8 schools. Milwaukee Public Schools District went from 10 K-8 schools in 2000 to 61 in the fall of 2005, including those that were in the process of transitioning to K-8 (Carr, 2005). Pittsburgh made the move to K-8 in 2006 (Smydo, 2006). Baltimore also opened 18 new K-8 schools in the fall of 2006, and Dayton, Ohio, is reportedly in the process of eliminating all of its middle schools (Bowie, 2007).

Summary

Although empirical studies (Alspaugh, 1998; Arcia, 2007; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Cook et al., 2006, 2008; McEwin, Dickinson, and Jacobson, 2005; & Offenber, 2001) have reported enhanced academic achievement and reduced behavior problems in young adolescents educated in K-8 schools, compared to middle schools, a number of researchers and educators contend that the picture is more complex than can be accounted for strictly by the grade configuration of the schools these students attend. George (2005), in an overview of the positive and negative outcomes of reconfiguring middle schools as K-8 schools, proposed that troubled middle schools are more a result of “troubled lives” than the grade configuration of the schools in question. McEwin et al. (2004, 2005) summarize the current status of the middle level education debate and note that no research to date has definitively answered the question of whether young adolescents register higher academic achievement in K-8 schools than they do in middle schools. These authors propose that grade configuration may not make “the difference,” although it does make “a difference” in ways that affect the school experience of their students. Consequently, they note the imperative to compare the programs and practices provided to these students across the two different types of school settings to facilitate informed decisions.

A number of factors beyond grade configuration have been related to outcomes for young adolescent students. The literature includes discussions related to the nature of the school environment, characteristics of students and the community, and issues related to the implementation of change. In general, there is agreement that, regardless of the grade configuration of a school, young adolescent students need a nurturing, supportive, and safe (i.e., student centered) environment that provides a challenging and integrative curriculum with adequate course offerings, extra-curricular programs, and leadership opportunities (Beane & Lipka, 2006; Cooney, 2001; Cromwell, 1999; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Pardini, 2002). Successful schools will have a philosophy, programs, and instructional delivery systems that are appropriate to a middle school education (Elovitz, 2007). The importance of improved teacher preparation at the middle level and high quality relationships with families and communities were also noted (Beane & Lipka, 2006). It was suggested that the number of students in a grade is more important than school size (Offenber, 2001). Issues in the implementation of an effective system will be different for urban and rural communities (Howley, 2002). Similarly, communities in which poverty is a factor will have issues that are unique (Pardini, 2002).

While the data suggest that transitions impede student success, especially when students move into settings that merge students from many schools (Alspaugh, 1998; Archia, 2007), individual differences in the adjustment to school transitions have also been noted (McDougall & Hymel, 1998). In addition, there is data to suggest that these negative effects can be offset in developmentally responsive schools with well-designed transition plans (Coldarci & Hancock, 2002; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; NMSA, 2002; Paglin & Fager, 1997).

Recommendations regarding the implementation of middle school change address the importance of making data-driven decisions with teacher, parent, and community input (Pardini, 2002). At the school level, implementation of a new K-8 may be less disruptive, if introduced gradually (expanded one grade per year) rather than all-at-once (Smydo, 2007). It has been suggested that shifting targeted, underperforming schools to K-8 may be more successful than sweeping, districtwide change (Pardini, 2002).

In conclusion, Coladarci and Hancock (2002), note the importance of distinguishing the results of empirical research from anecdotal case studies. These authors contend that even the well-designed studies that have identified advantages for K-8 schools still do not provide the whole picture. They stress the need for research that disentangles the possible interactions between grade configurations and other factors.

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