



THE K-8 SOLUTION: THE RETREAT FROM MIDDLE SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

Most people think the grade configuration of schools they attended was perfect. Whether they attended an old fashioned junior high (normally grades 7-9) or something less traditional, like K-3 and 4-8, ask a person what works and they'll tell you how they were educated.

But the research tells a different story. Middle schools, for one, have been called the “weak link” of public education. According to researchers, the transition to middle school is often a difficult one for students, and during these years, there is often a problem with discipline, absenteeism and low test scores. Recently, many school districts have begun to reconfigure the “traditional” model of public education. Districts such as Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Cleveland are moving away from having separate elementary, middle and high schools, and instead are combining kindergarten through eighth grade in one school. K-8 schools cut down on the number of transitions a child has to make in the course of his or her education, and research has shown that this could improve academic achievement and self-esteem, by increasing the safety and comfort a student feels in school. This new model can also help reduce school size, discipline problems and parental dissatisfaction.

While this model seems new, it is actually a return to the way public schools were configured prior to mid-twentieth century. Private, parochial and boarding schools generally use the K-8 model. And over the last fifteen years, many charter schools, innovative public schools open and attended by choice, have combined elementary, middle and even high school grades into one school. Some charters do this out of necessity, due to a lack of facilities, but others believe that having K-8 or K-12 in one school helps to develop self-confidence and support systems among students of all ages. More and more urban school districts are looking at trying the K-8 model. Recently, Washington, D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee suggested this model to improve academic achievement among middle schoolers and to prevent more students from leaving the struggling D.C. public school system. She has, however, been met with strong criticism.

But is there something to this notion? What does the research – and the experience of successful schools – tell us? Those and other questions are answered in this look at K-8 schools.



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BACK TO BASICS?

Large urban school districts across the country have begun to move away from the traditional middle school model and have created K-8 schools. Some school districts, such as Cleveland and Cincinnati, have eliminated all of their middle schools and offer only K-8 and 9-12 schools, or other combinations such as 4-12. Other districts have incorporated the model mixing middle schools with K-8 schools, as in Milwaukee, where 17 percent of their schools are K-8. This K-8 model actually goes back to the way schools were organized in the early twentieth century, until educators questioned if that was the best model for adolescents. Between 1910 and 1960, junior high schools or middle schools were created, and by 1960, 80 percent of American students attended three schools during their public school career: elementary, middle and high school.

However, over the last two decades, school administrators began seeing problems with the middle school model, starting with low academic achievement scores. Middle school students historically earn lower scores on state tests that measure proficiency in major subjects, such as reading or math. It also has been difficult to find experienced teachers for middle school grades due to the increasingly “bad rap” these students receive for their poor academics, discipline and overall attitude towards school, whether valid or not. Parents also voiced their disappointment with the middle school environment, and felt that the class sizes were too large, their students weren’t safe and the disciplinary problems were increasing.

To try to solve some of these problems, education researchers began looking at the middle school model and comparing it with the K-8 schools. They found that there are benefits to the latter model. Some of these benefits are:

- ⊙ Safety – Parents and children feel safer in a K-8 school as they become older because they are secure in their location and enjoy continuity.
- ⊙ Fewer distractions – Putting middle school students with younger children keeps out the distractions of high school students and the potential for drugs and other negative outside influences.
- ⊙ Engagement – Studies have shown students do not suffer the same motivational declines in schoolwork and extra-curricular activities when they stay in a K-8 school. Discipline problems and absences also are reduced.
- ⊙ Achievement – Research has shown that students do not experience the same academic declines when the middle school transition is eliminated.

Many different analyses have come to similar conclusions. Leslie Miles White wrote in his 2007 paper *Incorporating the Middle School: K-8, A Better Model?* that “the K-8 grade configuration supplies a more supportive environment for adolescents, creating a better match for their developmental needs than a middle school grade configuration and requires only a single transition into high school.”

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In the late 1990s, urban school districts like Baltimore, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Oklahoma City and Philadelphia began to implement a K-8 model. Today, all have incorporated this model into their school systems. Former CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, was concerned that test scores in the sixth grade plummeted as a student transitioned into middle school. She wanted to ensure stability for students by implementing K-8 schools. In Philadelphia, the School Reform Commission was created to address the education crisis in the city. In addition to embracing a multiple provider model to deliver education, then Superintendent Paul Vallas also was in favor of increasing the number of K-8 campuses.

Charter schools also have adopted the K-8 model, and according to The Center for Education Reform's *National Online Charter School Directory*, approximately 20 percent of charters across the country are serving a K-8 population. Charter schools typically serve a smaller population, which research has shown can be advantageous for learning because smaller schools better serve the individual needs of students. Implementing the K-8 model further ensures strong discipline, safety of students, engagement of students in school, and better student-teacher relationships.

MODELS FOR SUCCESS

While there has not been extensive research on the topic of K-8 schools, the research that exists suggests that the K-8 configuration is having a positive effect on students' academic achievement and overall engagement in school. The different cities that have implemented this reform have seen improvements in discipline, self-esteem, motivation, attendance and academics. Parents also are more satisfied with these schools and believe their children's safety and well-being have improved.

Some examples of positive results of the K-8 school model are:

- ② In Portland, Oregon, freshmen in high school with only one prior transition had statistically significant higher GPAs than those freshmen who attended separate middle schools.
- ② In Cleveland, Ohio, sixth grade students in K-8 schools scored 18 percent higher in reading and 23 percent higher in math than their peers in traditional middle schools.
- ② Analysis showed that students in Philadelphia who remain in a K-8 school had higher achievement growth over time than if they attended an elementary school and a middle school.
- ② In Milwaukee, absenteeism and suspension rates were four and nine percentage points higher in traditional middle schools.
- ② African-American students in K-8 schools in Pittsburgh outperformed their peers in traditional public schools in math and reading.

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- ② Students in K-8 schools in Miami-Dade County had significant short-term beneficial effects on achievement, attendance, and suspension rates. Sixth and seventh grades showed greater improvement in mathematics and reading compared to the same grades in middle schools, but the two groups had identical scores in ninth grade, so the effects were not long term.
- ② A recent study looked at 95 schools across the country serving over 40,000 students. This report found that older K–8 schools perform significantly better than middle schools, and this advantage is explained by differing student and teacher populations, average grade size, and school transition.
- ② Dr. Jean Mylen is a principal of Vista Verde, a K-8 school in Irving, California. She has found that discipline, dress and language are better at the school, because the older children are expected to act as role models. Students are more active and willing to get involved in new activities because they feel comfortable with their teachers and their peers.

Some are concerned that these reports do not account for all of the factors that may have led to student improvement. First, many of the K-8 schools tend to be smaller, and because research has shown smaller schools can be advantageous, it is difficult to say the K-8 model is the explicit cause for improved achievement, rather than a combination of both reforms. Also, some of these studies did not account for socio-economic differences between students in K-8 schools and traditional middle schools, which may lessen the findings. However, there is no question that there were positive benefits for students in non-middle school configurations. In cities like Washington, D.C., where only 39 percent of secondary public school students are proficient in reading, only 36 percent are proficient in math, and the high school completion rate in four years is 57.6 percent according to Education Week, the benefits of a K-8 model could make all the difference.

ECONOMIES OF SCALE

K-8 campuses can benefit a school district economically as well. In certain areas of the country, such as Detroit or Pittsburgh, where public school populations have declined over the years, combining middle school grades with elementary grades can eliminate the need to keep open a building that is not filled to capacity. By closing a school building, the district will save money. School districts also could save on transportation costs because fewer buses, routes and drivers would be needed to transport the students to and from school if a district implemented a K-8 configuration.

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IS THE NATION'S CAPITOL NEXT?

In June 2008 D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee included the consolidation of elementary and middle schools into K-8 programs as a major part of her effort to reform the D.C. public school system. Her plan is a response to parents who do not want to send their children to the dismal middle schools in the district, but would rather keep their children in extended elementary schools. In July, the D.C. City Council approved a transfer of \$125 million from the public schools' renovation budget, which includes provisions to close 23 underperforming and under-enrolled schools, and to convert 18 schools to K-8 configurations by 2009.

The City Council Chairman Vincent Gray and others on the council are not supportive of the K-8 plan and said in a *Washington Post* editorial August 3, "A comprehensive strategy for the implementation of this concept is still needed, and more evidence is required to ensure that the positive outcomes claimed will result." The original blueprint for this plan was presented in November, but the D.C. Council is letting politics and their frustrations with the speed of Mayor Adrian Fenty and Chancellor Rhee's reforms get in the way of enacting good plans for D.C. public school students. Currently, \$58 million of the \$125 million is budgeted for the K-8 reconfiguration plan and changes are expected to begin this school year.

CONCLUSION

Public education typically has been slow to respond to challenges. When strong leaders look for options to address immediate needs, they should have the ability to institute changes that have a strong chance for success. The data clearly suggest that creating K-8 schools may be just the right solution to help middle school students perform better academically and develop as engaged, motivated students. Historically, middle school students have scored poorly on academic assessments, and their absenteeism, suspension rates and discipline issues have increased over time, while students who enter high school with more confidence, having experienced less mobility, do better. Washington, D.C. is just one city looking to improve its public education system, and developing a strong K-8 model may be one solution that can reap benefits for teachers, parents and students.

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END NOTES

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