The Revival of K-8 Schools

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The author would like to thank the following people for their support on this project, their research and Internet help, their television panel sharing time, and their answers to questions about middle-level education: Alida Begina, Michael E. Crocco, Joseph P. Finoia, Robert Francis, Werner S. Hirsch, Lisa Norwood, Deirdre Prisco, Melissa Hirsch Rosenay, and Connecticut State Rep. Peter Villano.

Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling
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by

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ISBN 0-87367-901-6
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Bloomington, Indiana
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Introduction

There is nothing new about K-8 schools. K-8 schools and one-room schoolhouses were popular throughout the 19th century and for the first 40 years of the 20th century. Like a pendulum swinging back and forth, a revival of K-8 schools in the 21st century is phasing out the junior high concept in some places.

Keith Look, a researcher with the Philadelphia Education Fund, states there is a growing body of research that shows K-8 schools to be more effective in improving student achievement in the middle-level grades (2002). Data collected in Philadelphia shows students from K-8 schools performing better on standardized tests and displaying higher GPAs in ninth grade than do students from middle schools. K-8 schools also are popular groupings among private and parochial schools, and they are common overseas, especially in European school systems.

The middle school model still predominates in public schools in our nation. There were more than 12,000 middle schools in 1993, three middle schools for every junior high school. The National Center for Education Statistics data for the 1999 school year showed a total of
26,130 elementary schools serving students through fifth or sixth grade, compared with 3,249 K-8 schools (Pardini 2002, p. 8).

Still, many school leaders whose districts are returning to the K-8 model believe they are part of a growing movement. The young teens in middle schools "tend to be hormones in sneakers running around," Ellen Savitz, Philadelphia's deputy chief academic officer for school development, said. The school system "started to treat them like mini-high school kids, and they were not ready."

There are many middle schools that are productive and doing a wonderful job. But many K-8 schools are getting calls from middle school principals for information about K-8 successes and about conversion to K-8 schools. There is much interest around the country in the revival of K-8 schools.
Middle-Level Education Models

The one-room schoolhouse, the nation's first model for middle-level education, practiced many of the innovations that one reads about today. For example, students received a considerable amount of individual attention in the one-room schools that were common in rural America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Cooperative learning, which is being touted as a promising education practice today, was commonplace, with older students helping the younger ones. Those who remember the one-room school frequently point out that values and ethics were part of the school curriculum; and students were taught love of country, respect for law and authority, and often religious and moral values.

Today our schools have become more complex because of social issues, pressures, and problems. Students now must receive a very different and more elaborate education experience if they are to be successful. The small, simpler schools of the past could not possibly offer the curricular variety and experiences that are offered students today.
Junior High Schools

About 1910 the first junior high schools were established in the United States. A survey in 1916 showed 54 junior high schools in 36 states. One year later a survey indicated that the number had increased to about 270 schools. Junior high schools consisted of grades 7, 8, and 9, grade 9 being the freshman year of high school.

Junior high schools were established for the following reasons:

• To provide a transitional period from the elementary school to the high school.
• To ease the difficulty of entering early adolescence, a trying period of growth and development.
• To accommodate the special physical, emotional, and social problems of this age group.
• To foster a gradual development of independence in learning and self-discipline.
• To allow for the exploration of special interests, aptitudes, and abilities, thus aiding the students in vocational and educational planning.
• To help students through counseling and guidance to plan intelligently for adult life.
• To articulate the total 12-year school program by offering the junior high school segment.

The Middle School

School districts put the ninth grade back into the senior high school and created a new organization of 5-8, 6-8, and 7-8 schools, labeled the intermediate or middle
school. Middle schools started becoming popular in the 1960s and 1970s and remained popular well into the 1990s. In the 1960s, there were about 1,000 middle schools in our nation. In 2003, there are more than 12,000 middle schools.

The middle school is intended to provide the exploratory learning that the junior high school never quite achieved. The junior high school was considered by many to be a mini-high school. However, because of societal changes, improvements in health and nutrition, and increased rates of physical and social maturation, ninth-graders are more like high school students today than they were when the original junior high school was conceived.

Middle schools emphasize problem-solving skills, reflective thinking, and individualized learning programs. Curriculum content is easily integrated, and the emphasis in instruction is on the teacher being a personal guide and facilitator of learning, as opposed to being a dispenser of knowledge. Middle schools stress the use of interdisciplinary teaching teams, greater attention to advisory programs, and increased exploratory exposure to unified arts programs. There is a decreased emphasis on content and competition so commonly found in the junior and senior high school. Middle schools are popular in urban, suburban, and rural school districts.

Grade Configurations

The ideal grade configuration varies from community to community and school to school. Rural districts may
prefer to keep middle-level students in the K-8 elementary school in order to bolster community identity. An urban school district may want to minimize the influence of older students by having middle school groupings of sixth to eighth grades, seventh through ninth grades, or some other combination.

Many factors must be taken into consideration when deciding which grade configuration best suits the needs of any community. Among the considerations are:

- Number of students
- Transportation costs
- Socioeconomic status of the student population
- School system goals for student achievement
- Effects on other schools
- Number of transitions for affected students
- School building layout and design
- Effects on parent involvement
- Budget considerations

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory published a study involving eight schools from the northwest section of the United States (Paglin and Fager 1997). Questions raised included:

1. How does the school’s grade span develop?
2. How is the school structured to meet the needs of the particular grades it contains?
3. What are potential weaknesses or problems of the grade span and how does the school address them?
4. What are some learning opportunities offered by the grade span and how does the school take advantage of them?
5. What are some activities to facilitate transitions from the previous school to the next school?
6. What are some observed outcomes and keys to success?

By 1993, the National Center for Education Statistics stated there were about 12,000 middle schools in the United States, about three for every junior high school. Still, the middle school’s star clearly has fallen. By the mid-1990s, schools that were praised for their team teaching, flexible schedules, and interdisciplinary instruction found themselves under attack for placing too much emphasis on creating a nurturing environment for students and too little on their academic progress. One red flag came from the findings of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, which showed a sharp decrease in student achievement in mathematics and science between fourth and eighth grades. The results prompted former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, in his 1998 “State of American Education” speech, to declare, “While we do a good job of teaching math and science in the early years, we begin to drift in the middle years and fall behind the international standard of excellence.” Marc S. Tucker and Judy B. Codding of the National Center for Education and the Economy, wrote, “America’s middle schools are the wasteland of our primary and secondary landscape.” Educators, government officials, parents, and concerned citizens began to take a critical look at American schools and middle schools in particular (Pardini 2002, p. 10).
Where Does Sixth Grade Belong?

A growing problem among school districts is determining where the sixth grade belongs. While many communities have moved sixth grade out of elementary schools and into middle schools, not every community endorses that move. In 2002 in Cupertino, California, more than 200 parents signed a petition opposing a plan to convert junior high schools into middle schools to include sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students. The parents wanted the sixth grade to stay in the elementary school. Plans to put all sixth-graders in middle school also raised alarm in Austin, Texas, in 2002. Some parents fear that sixth-graders will get the worst of it in fights with older children who are more physically mature (Cromwell 2002b, p. 1).

Most educators and researchers would agree that sixth-graders are physically and psychologically closer to seventh- and eighth-graders than they are to first- or second-graders. Yet many parents still are debating whether sixth-grade children are ready to attend school with seventh- and eighth-graders.

In the debate over where sixth grade belongs, it is parents who often prefer that their children remain within the protective walls of an elementary school. One solution to the debate is to keep the K-8 configuration or change to K-8 schools. However, in doing so, the focus in these K-8 schools would be K-5 or K-6 and then 6-8 or 7-8. With smaller numbers of sixth-grade children in a K-8 school, the principal and staff can meet the protective needs of these children.
Preparing Students for Middle Grades

How the transition from elementary school to middle school is handled will influence how well students make the transition, whether those students are fifth-graders going into sixth grade or sixth-graders going into seventh grade. But for fifth-graders entering sixth grade, a smooth, helpful transition is especially critical. The following changes make the transition to middle school difficult:

1. Academic demands tend to be tougher than in elementary school.
2. Middle schools tend to be larger than elementary schools.
3. Students are accountable to different teachers for each subject in middle school.
4. Many students are experiencing the onset of puberty and awareness of the opposite sex.
5. Often students leave behind one group of friends to mix with a new group.
6. Students move from being the oldest students in their elementary environment to being the youngest in middle school.
7. Behavioral standards are different than among elementary students.

Many middle schools treat sixth-graders a bit differently from seventh- and eighth-graders, having them eat lunch separately and work with two or three different teachers, instead of five or six teachers. Having sixth-graders remain in a K-8 school would eliminate the transition problems of going from elementary to middle school.
M. Lee Manning (1999) cites seven important benchmarks needed to implement student-friendly perspectives for middle schools. These benchmarks can also be applied to middle-level students in a K-8 school.

1. Student-friendly middle schools provide education experiences that address young adolescents' tremendous diversity.
2. Student-friendly middle schools provide teachers who are trained in middle school concepts and early adolescence development.
3. Student-friendly middle schools provide exploratory programs.
4. Student-friendly middle schools provide developmentally responsive, comprehensive guidance and counseling programs.
5. Student-friendly middle schools ensure equal access to all educational experiences.
6. Student-friendly middle schools ensure a positive and safe learning environment.
7. Student-friendly middle schools involve parents, families, and community members.

The "Elemiddle" School

David L. Hough coined the term, "Elemiddle School," in his 1995 article, "The Elemiddle School: A Model for Middle Grades Reform." Hough studied the relationship between a school’s grade span and its ability to implement the programs characteristic of exemplary middle schools. The ideal setting for a high-quality middle-level education is what Hough calls "Elemiddle"
schools, those with both primary and middle grades and with a specific focus on implementing effective middle-level programs. Hough states that most true ele-middle schools are K-8, though some may be 4-8 or 5-8. Hough found that “K-8 schools were better able to implement the so-called middle school program components than any other schools he looked at.”

Hough argued that teachers working in K-8 schools were trained to bring a student-centered approach to their teaching, while secondary teachers are focused on their subjects. In K-8 schools, teachers were used to teaming, planning together, individualizing instruction, and working with the same group of students all day. In secondary schools, Hough argued, the math teacher often does not know which of his students are also taught by his colleague in the English department. Hough found that eighth-graders in K-8 schools and sixth-graders in K-6 and K-8 schools outperformed their peers attending middle and junior high schools.

Kay Hymowitz, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and author of Children and Popular Culture, points out that forces in today’s society are pushing 10-to 14-year-olds to “grow up too fast.” Hymowitz believes that K-8 schools “are in a better position than middle schools to remind us all, not just kids, but parents and the community too, that these young people are still children and should be treated as such.” At the same time, K-8 schools provide the ideal environment to begin fostering leadership in young adolescents. “Why not put them in a place where they can learn to be more responsible?” Hymowitz asks (Pardini 2002, p. 11).
This is exactly what is happening in Fayetteville, Tennessee, where older children serve as bus monitors and undertake service projects, while “the little kids have someone to look up to in K-8 schools,” says Wanda Sisk, the district’s supervisor of instructional programs. Sisk explained that “the bigger kids love it, and it’s definitely stimulating leadership for the entire school.”

Combining early elementary and middle-level grades in the same building also improves student behavior. Oklahoma City’s sixth- and seventh-graders who are attending what was once a K-5 school even have cleaned up their language. Principals point out that the older middle-level students in the same building with younger children not only watch their language but take a protective attitude toward the little ones.
The New K-8 Model

The new K-8 school must be a comfortable, familiar setting for students and parents. A modern up-to-date curriculum should be in place. Baltimore School Superintendent Carmen Russo explained, “Just because we’re returning to K-8 schools doesn’t mean the way we deliver instruction is the same or that what we’re teaching is the same.” Russo further stated, “There is no point in reorganizing the deck chairs on the Titanic unless you deal with the real meat of what we’re trying to do, which is to improve instruction” (Pardini 2002, p. 12).

In the Baltimore city system, a move toward K-8 schools is an integral part of a major school reorganization plan. The reorganization calls for doubling the number of K-8 schools to 34 over the next three years. The district aims to create smaller learning communities that will better meet the needs of its students.

In many cases, new K-8 schools are being designed along the lines of Hough’s Elemiddle model or, as more than one official put it, a combination of the best of both the elementary and middle school worlds. So while the students get the support and nurturing they need, they also are prepared to make a smooth transition to high school. That means middle-level students change
classes and work with a team of three or four teachers, each of whom teaches one or two subjects. The curriculum includes such core subjects as English, mathematics, science, and social studies; but it also includes art, music, physical education, computer lab, and some industrial arts and home economics courses. These new K-8 schools also provide facilities and programs once found only in middle and high school: science labs, foreign language classes, guidance services, chorus, band, and algebra in the eighth grade. Teachers focus more on project-based learning and problem-solving activities than they do in the lower grades. When addressing the academic needs of middle-level students in a K-8 school, teachers must pay more attention to tying the curriculum content to pupil-centered activities. Administrators feel it is easier to staff K-8 schools than middle schools.

K-8 schools need to provide strong extracurricular programs that give older students the chance to produce a school newspaper, participate in band or drama, and engage in expanded sports and athletic programs. Thus school officials have to look at the physical facilities of elementary schools that become K-8 schools, including the size of the gymnasium or cafeteria, lavatories, school furniture, and the library/media center. Money also can be an issue. Part of the $1 billion bond issue passed by Cleveland voters in May 2002 was used to reconfigure and enlarge K-5 schools into K-8 schools. On the other hand, such modifications can be far less expensive than building new middle schools.

Changing a school’s configuration can be done in many ways. In most places, the new grade span is phased
in over several years by adding one grade a year to existing K-5 and K-6 schools. In Philadelphia, school leaders planning for a new K-8 school looked at a successful K-5 or K-6 school where students were making good progress. They felt the ideal place to start expanding into a K-8 model is one where the staff and parents see the value of extending a positive school environment through the eighth grade. In Baltimore, a large 6-8 middle school worked backward, one grade at a time, until it was a K-8 school.

Barbara Byrd-Bennett, Cleveland's superintendent, advises school superintendents interested in returning to the K-8 model to start with a single school in need of improvement. New Haven, Connecticut, did this with the Isadore Wexler School, a K-5 school needing repairs. The school was combined with a nearby K-4 school, the Helene Grant School. The newly renovated and much enlarged Wexler School opened in September 2002 as the Wexler-Grant Community School, and a grade will be added each year until it becomes a K-8 school in three years. The old Helene Grant K-4 school is being remodeled and will become an early childhood learning center. I was the principal of the Isadore Wexler Community School when it was called Winchester Community School from 1966-1977, and I wrote about the school in Fastback 101 Winchester: A Community School for the Urban/Advantaged, published in 1977.

Byrd-Bennett also advised that after designating a school to be a K-8 school, a broad-based committee of teachers, parents, board of education members, and community leaders should plan the physical design for
the new school and develop new curriculum and instructional programs. Another group, professional educators from a nearby university or school of education, would be an important addition to the committee. The committee and central office staff would work closely with the architect and contractor for the new school.

There is no one single answer or method for adopting the K-8 model. Planning and common sense are two important ingredients needed for this endeavor.
Why Move to K-8 Schools?

The K-8 school dominated public education in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. However, that changed by the 1960s. In 1920, four out of five high school graduates attended a K-8 elementary school followed by a four-year high school. However, by 1960, four out of five high school graduates reported attending a K-6 elementary school, a three-year junior high school, and a three-year senior high school. Junior high schools, which aimed to prepare students for high school, began disappearing in the mid-1960s; and middle schools became the new school model, with a return to the four-year senior high school.

Now K-8 schools are re-emerging as one of a number of interventions to address questions that trouble middle school educators and policy makers:

1. How can schools increase academic rigor in the middle-level grades?
2. What school conditions are necessary to support adolescent identity and development?
3. What interventions aid student transitions between grades and between schools?
4. What role do race, class, and gender play in answering these questions?

Less than one year after signing on as chief executive officer of the 77,000-student Cleveland schools in late 1998, Barbara Byrd-Bennett came to the conclusion that the district's 25 middle schools were failing. Overall, test scores plummeted once students reached sixth grade, and absence and suspension rates soared. Byrd-Bennett concluded that Cleveland's middle school model, mandated by the courts to address overcrowding, had not been well executed. The schools were too big. Teachers had not been adequately trained in, nor had the resources to implement, a true middle school philosophy. Beyond that, Byrd-Bennett came to believe that the configuration of grades 6-8 that prevailed in Cleveland's middle schools actually worked against the needs of young adolescents.

"Here we were," she says, "taking children at 10 years from their most delicate environment. Then we put them in a new school where they had to move from class to class, learning to deal with a series of other adults when they were still learning to deal with each other." Her solution was to phase out middle schools and replace them with K-8 elementary schools. Byrd-Bennett explained, "We wanted to extend the stability of the school environment to address the needs of the kids, rather than make them fit into a particular structure" (Pardini 2002, p. 6).

Since the 1999-2000 school year, 21 Cleveland schools have been reconfigured or are in the process of being
reconfigured to accommodate kindergarten through eighth grade. The results have been significant, with sixth-graders in K-8 schools posting better attendance and higher standardized test scores than do their peers in middle schools. "Down the road," predicts Byrd-Bennett, "we'll basically be a K-8 school district" (Pardini 2002, p. 6).

The move to scrap middle schools in favor of K-8 schools is prompted by several factors, including a growing discontent with middle schools, research on the link between grade configuration and academic achievement, and the wishes of parents.

In the Everett, Massachusetts, public schools, a district of 5,600 students in suburban Boston, all five elementary schools were converted to K-8 schools in the year 2003. Superintendent Fred Foresteire says that he is convinced K-8 schools provide "a better atmosphere where no child falls through the cracks."

The 43,000-student Cincinnati Public School District completed its five-year transition to K-8 schools in June 2000. Kathleen Ware, associate superintendent, said, "The move comes largely in response to parental dissatisfaction with the district's middle schools." Ware noted that discipline problems and absenteeism had declined while overall student achievement had improved. She added that parents were very pleased with the K-8 model and definitely wanted it to stay.

In Philadelphia a school district empowerment plan called for converting middle schools to K-8 schools where feasible. The move was based largely on the results of a school district study that found eighth-graders
in K-8 schools scoring significantly higher than did eighth-graders in middle schools based on standardized tests in reading, mathematics, and science. The study is particularly noteworthy because researchers controlled for the effects of poverty and race.

In rural Fayetteville, Tennessee, all 4,300 students were attending K-8 schools by fall 2003. The move involved reconfiguring four K-6 elementary schools, and it was designed in part to address a nearly 30% dropout rate in the district. Under the new plan, middle-level students attend schools closer to home. "We want them to stay in their own communities," said Wanda Sisk, supervisor of instructional programs. She felt that in these K-8 schools, the principals would get to know the students and their families better.

The recent Baltimore City School System’s move toward K-8 schools was an integral part of a major school reorganization plan, which called for doubling the number of K-8 schools to 34 in about three years. In the words of Superintendent Carmen Russo, "The district aims to create smaller learning communities that would better meet the needs of our students."

In fall 2001 Oklahoma City voters approved $530 million over the next seven years to finance a school reform that included renovating every school in the district. The plan is intended to stem the exodus of students from the district after completing elementary school and will reconfigure most district elementary schools into K-8 buildings.

Chicago, one of the largest school districts in the country, has been going through changes in the struc-
ture of their schools. Junior highs and middle schools have never been popular in Chicago, and most of Chicago's schools had been K-8 models. However, because of overcrowding in the elementary schools in the 1950s and 1960s, prompted by a large wave of migration from the South, middle schools and cluster schools housing seventh and eighth grades became popular. Some high schools were expanded to serve students in grades 7-12. In later years, the school board felt that K-8 schools cost less to build and operate than do middle schools or junior high schools. In addition, parents preferred having their children in one school for those eight years.

Many districts are going to K-8 models and phasing out middle and junior high schools. For some districts, the reason is financial. Colorado State Education Commissioner William Moloney, in a 2002 report, explained: "It's not an issue of abolishing existing middle schools. That would be wasteful. But when we have an enormous financial burden ahead of us in new school construction, you have to look at other options" (Cromwell 2002a, p. 3) He felt that adding two grades, seventh and eighth, to existing K-6 schools would be less expensive than building new middle schools.

In Higley, a suburb near Phoenix, Arizona, in December 1998 the school board decided the five new schools it envisioned would be K-8 schools. The school board believed that it made sense to keep preteens and early teens in the regimented elementary school setting. Higley school officials said that K-8 school students are less likely to succumb to negative peer pressure than
are students in middle schools and junior highs, which are basically mini-high schools.

In New Haven, Connecticut, all new elementary schools being built in the next five to 10 years will be K-8 schools. At the present time (2003) there are six K-8 schools in New Haven. A New Haven school principal told me that in his K-8 school, younger children have positive role models to look up to in the seventh- and eighth-graders in his school. These older students serve as tutors, mentors, and aides on school buses and in the cafeteria.

Jim Cox, principal of Girdwood Elementary School in Girdwood, Alaska, said the K-8 configuration in his 142-student school works well in every situation. Cox stated, “The staff and community have high academic expectations with student responsibility being stressed at the same time.” He further cites the high degree of parent involvement in his small school, especially for the seventh- and eighth-graders.

Parental Support for K-8 Schools

The growing support for K-8 schools comes from parents. For example, parental dissatisfaction with middle schools was one of the main reasons for the shift to K-8 schools in Cincinnati. Educators in Cincinnati, as in most urban districts, found that families keep their children in elementary school but then pull their children out of public schools when the children reach the middle school level. The reasons parents give include discipline problems, high suspension and expulsion rates, poor attendance, lack of achievement, transporting children long
distances by bus, and mixing of children from different neighborhoods. These parents usually send their children to parochial and nonreligious private schools that always have been organized as K-8 and 9-12 schools.

Parents in Baltimore, Maryland, often citing safety issues, were instrumental in convincing school officials to create more K-8 schools. Because most K-8 schools are neighborhood schools, parents felt more comfortable keeping their children closer to home.

In Oklahoma City, parents were more inclined to stay involved with K-8 schools than they were with middle schools. School officials reported that the reason was that K-8 schools correlate highly with student success in school. Typically, when a child graduates from a K-6 school, parents disconnect from that school and do not reconnect with the child’s middle school. One of the strengths of the elementary school is the high degree of parent involvement. That involvement lessens when a child enters middle school and further lessens when a child enters the 9-12 high school.

Sometimes, experts say, parents have more of a problem than their child with the child’s transition to middle school. However, getting middle-level children properly adjusted to their new school requires constant monitoring throughout the year. Parental support for this age group is vital.

Advantages of K-8 Schools

Keith Look (2001) reports a number of advantages to K-8 schools:
1. K-8 schools may be a viable alternative to the large middle schools that struggle to be more than "factory models of education."
2. K-8 schools can enhance social capital and give at-risk students, in particular, greater opportunities at success by building relationships with staff over nine years.
3. Parent involvement improves because younger and older siblings are enrolled in the same building and because parents usually are happiest with their children’s elementary school experiences.
4. Middle school students in a K-8 school behave differently than they do in a middle school. They take on a role of protector and role model, as opposed to having to establish new reputations on entering a large middle school.
5. K-8 schools can incorporate the same distinct, developmentally appropriate, academically challenging programs found in traditional middle schools.
6. K-8 schools can enhance teacher collaborations and creative approaches better than can large middle schools.
7. Internal accountability for promoting children in K-8 schools runs more smoothly than in large middle schools.
8. K-8 schools are a better option than is a large middle school when financial resources are limited.

There is no conclusive evidence showing that children in grades 6-8 who attend K-8 schools do better than similar children in middle-level schools. However, in a
number of studies comparing K-8 schools to junior high schools in Milwaukee and New York City, K-8 schools outperformed junior high schools in almost every category assessed. In the 1970s Milwaukee researchers Simmons and Blyth studied more than 600 students beginning in the sixth grade and followed them through eighth grade. During this three-year period, some students transitioned from a K-6 school into junior high school, while others remained in a K-8 school. The researchers found that, by the end of eighth grade, students in the K-8 school showed higher self-esteem, less victimization and bullying by other students, greater levels of participation in extracurricular activities, and healthier adolescent development (Look 2001, p. 2).

In the 1980s Denis Moore studied schools in New York City and found that K-8 schools not only have developmental and social advantages over junior high schools, but that eighth-grade reading scores of the students in the K-8 schools surpassed the scores of their counterparts in the junior high schools (Look 2001, p. 2).

In a Philadelphia study, Robert Offenberg (2001) found that SAT-9 scores in reading, math, and science were significantly stronger in K-8 schools than in middle schools. In addition, the advantage that K-8 schools had over middle schools grew larger over two years, especially in math. Offenberg also compared the ninth-grade performance of students who attended K-8 schools with students from middle schools. The grade point average for students from the K-8 schools was about one-tenth of a letter grade higher than the grades of those who attended middle school.
The Philadelphia study revealed an unanticipated finding as well. Offenberg discovered that as a school’s number of students per grade (not the total number of students per school) increased, the performance of K-8 and middle schools became more similar. This finding suggests that not only grade configuration, but also the number of students per grade — which is often smaller in a K-8 school — has a great effect on student achievement.

Following are some of the advantages of the K-8 school model:

- It is easier to fill teacher and staff vacancies in the middle-level grades of a K-8 school than in a middle school.
- A K-8 school is safer than a middle school because older children with younger siblings attending the same school take on the part of protector, tutor, and role model.
- Parental involvement is greater in K-8 schools because parents remain connected to one school longer and are more likely to have more than one family member enrolled in a given school at the same time.
- In a K-8 school, younger and older family members can travel to and from the school together at the same time, avoiding the stress for parents whose children board different buses at different times.
- School staff members feel more connected to the community because K-8 schools serve a smaller geographic area than does a middle school.
• Staff members and teachers in a K-8 school are able to see their influence as the students grow from small children into young adults.
• Students in a K-8 school are better known to the adults in the school and are less inclined to get into trouble.
• The early-grade teachers in a K-8 school know almost every student in the building and form lasting bonds.
• The middle-level teachers in a K-8 building can speak to the elementary teachers about students’ histories, learning styles, particular student problems, and family dynamics.
• Upper-grade students in a K-8 school can maintain relationships with past teachers with whom they feel most connected and can find them when they need support, advice, or friendship.
• Older children in a K-8 school develop positive leadership skills as role models and school leaders; assist the principal and teachers as part-time aides, tutors, and bus and cafeteria monitors; and take on other leadership assignments.
• K-8 students have to make only two transitions during their 13 years of schooling, K-8 and 9-12. Middle school students have to make three dramatic moves.
• Most parochial and private schools have K-8 configurations and are often envied by public school educators for their high achievement levels, high attendance rates, strong school discipline, positive standards of behavior, and school pride.
• K-8 students can form strong bonds of friendship and support with each other because they are together as a family for up to nine years.

• Seventh- and eighth-graders make up smaller numbers in a K-8 building and therefore are easier for teachers to teach, get along better with each other, and develop strong attachments to the school and their peers.

• A growing body of research shows K-8 schools to be effective in improving student achievement in the middle-level grades.

• Middle-level students in K-8 schools have lower suspension rates, better attendance levels, and higher test scores.

• Because K-8 schools are smaller than middle schools, they are most cost-effective for electricity, fuel, telephone, custodial maintenance, staffing, and other areas.

The revival of K-8 schools is often the topic of conversation at school reform conferences, at local school board meetings, and in informal discussions. Middle-level education and grades must fit a particular grade configuration. However, it must be remembered that no grade configuration is as important as are principals as instructional leaders, skilled and creative teachers, high and reasonable expectations for students, visionary central office staff, strong parental involvement, community support, and equitable fiscal resources.

A strong school foundation is vital to the success of students as they grow to adulthood. It now seems that
returning to the K-8 school may be one of the best means to meet the physical, academic, social, mental, and emotional challenges of middle-level students. There is little doubt that we will be reading and hearing more about the revival of the K-8 school.
Resources


Herman, Barry E. "A Solution to the Middle School Quandary." Hamden Chronicle, 22 August 2002, p. 10.


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