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Should We Do Away with Middle School?

Educators are debating whether middle school students would be better off in K–8 schools.

By Brian S. McGrath | May 23, 2016

Teacher's Guide

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Enter the Debate

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For many kids, moving from elementary school to middle school can be a tough transition. Sure, there are plenty of perks that younger kids look forward to, from getting a locker to switching classes throughout the day. But changing schools at this age can also be stressful. And research shows that for many kids, attending a separate school for middle school may not be **optimal**.

Separating middle schoolers from elementary and high school students has been a common practice for the past 40 years. The idea was that middle schoolers needed their own space in which to **navigate** the changes that are part of growing up.



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Experts agree that middle schools should provide a healthy learning environment for students.

But by the 1990s, disappointing test scores suggested to many educators that the middle school model wasn't working for many students. Since 2000, the number of K–8 (kindergarten through eighth grade) schools has been growing, backed by new research suggesting that middle schoolers fare better both academically and socially when they go to school with younger kids.

Yet some educators worry that the focus on where you go to school distracts from the real issue—that middle schoolers have unique social and emotional needs. The emphasis on academic achievement that's driving the K–8 trend, these educators say, could ignore the fact that teens really are different from elementary and high school students. According to this view, the focus should be on what happens inside a middle school, not where it is.

Where Did Middle Schools Come From?

Until the 1970s, K–8 schools were the **norm**. In most places in the U.S., a single building housed elementary and junior high students. The focus for all students was on academics.

Around 1960, educators began to examine the unique needs of young **adolescents**. At a conference for school leaders at Cornell University, in 1963, education professor William Alexander argued that the needs of older students in K–8 schools were not being met. He said upper-grade educators at K–8 schools were focusing solely on high school preparation and were not addressing these students' changing emotional needs.



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The middle school movement was started in the 1960s by educators who believed that young adolescents needed their own schools in order to succeed.

Alexander said these students needed teachers who could guide them through the in-between years. The emphasis should be on students' emotional growth and self-discovery, he said. Students should have more say in planning activities, and more time should be devoted to health and physical education.

At the time, teachers were being pushed to emphasize science and math, and to give more homework. It was the 1960s, and the U.S. was competing with the Soviet Union for first place in space exploration.

Were schools expecting too much from 11- and 12-year-olds, just when the kids were dealing with the challenges of growing up? That question fueled the middle school movement. The number of middle schools grew from about 1,500 to about 11,500 between 1970 and 2000.

Why the Turnaround?

About a decade ago, educators began to question whether moving students to middle schools was the right choice after all. Test scores fueled the debate. Between 1999 and 2004, the nation's elementary school students saw higher test scores in reading and math. Middle school students made smaller gains in math and made no progress in reading.



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Some educators say switching from elementary to middle school is a challenge for many young adolescents.

In 2010, researchers at the University of North Carolina compared the experiences of students who switched to middle schools with those who stayed in K–8 schools. These researchers found that students in their first year of middle school experienced a drop in grades and test scores while their peers who stayed in a K–8 school did not. The students in middle schools were also more likely to get into trouble. The researchers concluded that many middle school students have a hard time handling the switch to a new school and new teaching styles just when they are adjusting to the natural changes in their bodies and emotions. The researchers' solution? Attach middle schools to elementary schools, so the students won't have to move until high school.

Harvard education professor Martin West agrees with that conclusion. "Each grade in a middle school tends to have many more students, making them feel larger and more **impersonal**," he says. "We all know that moving to a new school can be hard socially. The evidence suggests that it can be hard academically, too, particularly for students in grades 6 and 7."



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Students in grades 5–8 are starting to think about who they are as individuals.

Are There Benefits to Middle School?

Still, West admits that there are plenty of excellent middle schools and that there are also K–8 schools that struggle. Many experts point out that simply changing how students are grouped cannot solve every problem. "It truly doesn't matter if schools are K–8, 6–12, 6–8, or any other **configuration**," says Ericka Uskali, director of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. What matters, she says, is that educators understand that academic success goes "hand in hand" with meeting kids' emotional needs.

Thomas Armstrong, director of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development, still believes middle school should be separate from elementary schools. "Middle schoolers are very definitely not children," Armstrong says. "I'm a strong believer in middle schools."

Where do you think middle schoolers belong? The answer may depend not only on which evidence is most convincing but also on personal experience. After all, it is a question that is perhaps best answered by students themselves.

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