

Running head: THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CONCEPT

**The Middle School Concept  
What Happened to the Junior High School?**

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## Middle School Concept 2

More than 30 years ago, the middle school movement began as a reaction to the junior high school which inadequately met the needs of the young adolescent. The middle school was founded on the same basic principles as the junior high school, but added several seemingly small elements. As the middle school movement picked up steam, more and more school districts began to reorganize their districts believing that middle schools would provide a better education for young adolescents. Most educators still believe that the middle school model has improved the quality of education for students. The question then is: If the middle school is based on the same basic principles as the junior high school of the early 1900s, why has the middle school been successful where the junior high school failed?

The history of the two school designs is very different. The junior high school began in 1909 as a three-year intermediate school to help students make the transition from elementary to high school by concentrating on academic subjects and by exposing students to careers and occupations (Jantzi and Brashear 2005). The first design was to be based on the characteristics of young adolescents and concerned with all aspects of growth and development. Consisting of grades 7-9, the main focus of the model was bringing depth to the curriculum, emphasizing growth and exploration, helping students gain independence and fostering responsibility. The junior high school was designed to provide the necessary transition to high school. Although, the concept of the junior high school seemed excellent, the schools soon began to deteriorate.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, junior high schools began to look more and more like the traditional high school. Teachers in these schools were organized by academic departments as they were in high schools, rather than the interdisciplinary core curriculum groups that the literature of the junior high school recommended. Students were promoted and retained on a subject by subject basis. Elective programs focused on specialization that would lead to

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quasi-majors at the high school rather than the exploration envisioned by other early junior high school educators. Rigid grouping patterns based on perceived ability (measured by I.Q.) or prior achievement became characteristic of the junior high school in many districts. To their dismay, teachers who had prepared for high school teaching often ended up by default in the junior high school. Too many administrators saw their assignment to the junior high school. Too many administrators saw their assignment to the junior high as a way station, an intermediate step to their real aspiration, which was the senior high school (where they had been assistant principal) and beyond. The junior high school, in practice, was shaped by the high school, by the state universities, by Harvard, and by the European universities established five centuries earlier (George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane 1992). Because the graduation credit process still included the ninth grade, the high school never truly relinquished its control of the grade causing it to become a high school housed in another building. All these factors led to a decline in the quality of education in the junior high schools.

Many people called for a reform of the junior high school with a refocus on the principals on which the idea was founded. This never happened and instead the emerging middle school began to take its place. Actually, many of the first middle schools were more often than not opened for reasons having little to do with the characteristics and needs of young adolescents, but for more social purposes.

One of the social forces contributing to the great increase in the number of middle schools in the 1960s, '70s and later was the move toward desegregation. In many districts, central office personnel realized that by reorganizing to a middle school format they could increase the amount of desegregation. School districts that had been presented with a court order to

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desegregate would close several junior high schools and move the 9th graders to high school. Then the 6<sup>th</sup> and sometimes 5<sup>th</sup> graders would be moved into newly created middle schools. This process, combined with other desegregation guidelines resulted in a far more desegregated school district (George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane 1992).

Another factor in the rise of middle schools was the change in demographic patterns in major portions of the United States. Enrollments in many districts plummeted to the point that reduction in force became a new household term. Many career teachers faced the prospect of job loss and schools were near the point of closing. Simultaneously, a large group of children were entering elementary school and with the advent of kindergarten the halls of lower grade schools were bursting at the seams. Dozens and dozens of school districts were faced with the prospect of opening new elementary schools while closing high schools.

Central office planners realized that by closing junior high schools and implementing middle schools, they could move the 9th graders to high school and increase high school enrollment. Concurrently, the 6<sup>th</sup> graders could be moved out of the elementary schools into the newly created middle schools, thus creating more room in the elementary schools.

Most school boards were very unclear about their purpose in creating middle schools, and equally imprecise about exactly what they wanted middle schools to accomplish. In that same manner, most school superintendents could not likely give a clear, concise, concrete vision for the middle schools created in their district (Mizell 1999).

Even though the middle school was created in most places out of social necessity, by the late 1980s many educators' experiences with the middle schools had become increasingly positive. School district staff members, teachers, and patrons were discovering that, properly

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organized and operated, middle schools often delivered substantial improvements for the district. These positive experiences probably influenced a substantial number of school districts to implement exemplary middle schools, even though their initial goal wasn't to create schools responsive to the characteristics and needs of young adolescent learners (George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane 1992).

Now whole states have endorsed the middle school concept for the benefits it brings. The model endorses more focus on curriculum, higher parental involvement, and centers around the needs of the 10-14 year old. More and more educators believe the intellectual, social, physical, and emotional needs of this age group are different from either elementary or high school students therefore a customized educational program is necessary. Because of this, the middle school must be a bridge between elementary and high school. It can not be an exaggerated elementary school nor a miniature high school, but a blend of the two.

According to the website "The Middle School Concept", the "concept" uses a teaming approach to education. A team is a group of teachers that have the same group of students. Their classrooms are clustered together on one wing, which allows students to get back and forth to class on time. Together, these teachers teach science, language, mathematics and social studies. The students on each team all go to elective classes at the same time. This affords the teachers the same planning period which can be used for team planning, curriculum integration and parent conferences. The scheduling of the team system allows for the flexibility of scheduling and grouping of students. Students also feel like they are part of a group when on a team. It creates the sense of a "school within a school".

Students in middle school are grouped on pods within a team. This group of students follows more or less the same academic schedule. They become very familiar with and supportive

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of each other. The pods imitate the elementary school class pattern and subject the students to far fewer peer groups and unfamiliar people or territory.

Guidance and counseling services are offered at the middle school in the areas of academic counseling, career exploration and information, parent relationships, peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, study skills, and group testing.

The curriculum is made up of three major elements: (1) basic skills (academic classes), (2) exploratory classes and (3) electives. The “Exploratory classes” component consists of computer keyboarding, computer hardware, career discovery, information skills, and foreign cultures. The elective classes may include: physical education, choir, band, art, and home economics.

The question remains whether the middle school of today is sincerely better than the junior high of yesterday. V. E. Lee and J. B. Smith’s (1993) findings indicate that the elements of the restructured middle school were positively associated with academic achievement and engagement with the schooling of eighth graders. Students who attended schools that encourage team teaching evidenced higher achievement. Additionally, less grouping by ability and a less rigid departmental structure appeared to promote social equality in achievement among students. In relation to engagement, Lee and Smith found that that “although attending restructured schools may positively influence academic engagement, this engagement may coexist with higher levels of at-risk behaviors”

Another study conducted sought to assess and evaluate the process of implementation of the recommendations on Turning Points (a school model which provides comprehensive school transformation) for middle grades reform, as well as their impact on students’ academic

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achievement, social-emotional development, and behavioral adjustment. The study focused on the association between the levels of implementation of the reform that participating schools attained and relevant student outcomes. The researchers obtained data on sets of schools that were at different levels of maturity (high, partial, or low) in reform implementation. The primary source of data was a set of annual surveys, the High Performance Learning Communities Assessments (HiPLaCes-A). These surveys were administered to teachers, staff members, students, administrators, and selected parents. Additional data was obtained from student records, attendance, and scores (reading, mathematics, and language arts) on local and state achievement tests.

Results of this longitudinal study indicated that across subject areas, adolescents in highly implemented schools had higher achievement (as measured by the Iowa Test of basic Skills and the California Test of Basic Skills) than those in nonimplemented schools and substantially better than those in partially implemented schools (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, Flowers 1997).

In 1999, Backes, Ralston, and Ingwalson examined the impact of middle school practices on student achievement in North Dakota's Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative (MGSSPI) schools, called BRIDGES schools. The major question asked was, "What effect has the implementation of middle level practices by BRIDGES Project schools had on student achievement in grades six through eight compared to non-BRIDGES schools in North Dakota?" The findings of the study indicated that the composite grade equivalent score from six to eight was higher in BRIDGES Project schools than in the areas of reading vocabulary, language mechanics, study skills, science, and social studies. There was no difference in composite grade equivalent scores in reading comprehension and spelling. Non-BRIDGES students outperformed

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BRIDGES students in the areas of language expression, math computation, and math concepts and applications.

Although they vary, results of these studies are promising. They provide a firm foundation that links the middle school concept to improved student achievement and socio-economic development. These studies also provide a starting point for others which may shed more light on the achievement or underperformance of the middle school concept.

In essence, the small organizational differences in the middle school concept make the difference. The success of the middle school is based largely on fact that the school is designed to meet the needs of students entering puberty. The school mimics elementary schools in many ways while introducing the principles and concepts of the high school. The junior high school lacked these important aspects. Most of all, the middle school concept tries to help students understand themselves before teaching them to understand concepts.

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## Bowens Handout

Although both the middle school and the junior high school were both founded on the same principles, the middle school has thrived because of its organizational structure. Below is a comparison of the two.

	<b>Middle School Concept</b>	<b>Junior High Philosophy</b>
Staffing	Teams	Departments
Planning Time	Daily Grade Level or Team Collaboration	One Period, Not all teachers at that grade level or group
Student Grouping	Grouped by the team of teachers they see daily	Grouped according to subjects, ability, or other
Academic Instructional Time	Larger blocks of time. Teachers may change it weekly to fit their needs	Usually divided into periods that have a specific time requirement everyday
Special Classes Art, P.E., Music, Band, Technology, Careers, Typing, etc...	Entire team of students are at Specialists at same time each day	Students may be mixed with students from other groups or homerooms or grade levels
Instructional Focus	Interdisciplinary, integration across curriculum. Having a general knowledge of the big picture for that grade level	Limited integration. Teacher may have several daily preparations. Teachers are often subject-matter specialists
School wide Goals	Emphasis on giving attention to addressing the many needs of adolescence and their stages of development	More focus on subject-area content
Structure	More flexible in schedule and time restraints. There are few bells. Students are with teachers for longer time periods	Class schedules are relatively uniform. Bells signal class changes. Students see more teachers each day

Appendix A—Moving on Up! Implementing C.K. in the Middle School  
Middle School Concept and Junior High Philosophy