

School Leaders: Is it Time to Reflect on Appropriate Middle-Level Education?

Lavetta B. Henderson¹

Abstract

Increased school accountability has increased the interest in various reform efforts and school practices. The middle school is coming under attack by some questioning the model and its future in American education. Some school districts have abandoned the middle school model and reconfigured into K-8 elementary schools, and some school districts are considering the option of reorganizing into a K-8 configuration reducing the number of middle schools in the district. In defense of the criticisms that emphasize the failure of American middle schools, there are studies that have findings of high student achievement and reduced behavior issues when students are educated in middle schools that have implemented the middle school concept, philosophy, and practices as a complete model, over time, and with fidelity. The question is asked of school leaders if it is now time to seriously reflect and address the current status of the middle school model and its future?

Keywords: middle schools, middle-level education, middle school characteristics, early adolescents, developmentally appropriate, middle-level leadership

1. Introduction

During the middle school years students experience a variety of changes and these are also the years that play an important part in the success of the student in high school and beyond. In the U.S., the high levels of attention on public school accountability and standards have increased the interest of reformers to reexamine the middle school philosophies and practices (Belair & Freeman, 2000; Raphael & Burke, 2012). George (2006) indicated that many of the middle schools in the Florida may not be serving their original function. Huss & Eastep (2011) found that many elements of the middle school movement were declining within individual schools. Some school districts have abandoned the middle school model and reconfigured into K-8 elementary schools, and some school districts are considering the option of reorganizing into a K-8 configuration reducing the number of middle schools in the district. In defense of the criticisms that emphasize the failure of American middle schools, there are studies that have findings of high student achievement and reduced behavior issues when students are educated in middle schools that have implemented the middle school concept, philosophy, and practices as a complete model, over time, and with fidelity. The question is asked of school leaders if it is now time to seriously reflect and address the current status of the middle school model and its future?

2. History of Middle Level Education

Edwards, Kemp, & Page (2014) indicated that in the 19th century students were basically educated in a 8-4 organization that consisted of eight years of elementary school and four years of high school.

¹ Ed.D, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Department of Educational Leadership & Counseling, College of Education, Gore Education Complex, 501 Orr Drive, Tallahassee, FL 32307.
Email: lavetta.henderson@famuedu, Phone: 850-561-2792, Fax: 850-599-3906

The first junior high school was opened in 1909 to reduce the amount of time children spent in elementary schools, to provide smoother transitions from elementary school to high school, and to provide an educational program for young adolescents (Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1961; Styron & Nyman, 2008). Weller (1999) indicated that the existing human development research had little impact on the early traditional junior high school because very limited information was known about adolescent behavior. Throughout the first half of the 20th century the common grade span organization was elementary school for grades 1-6, junior high school for grades 7-9 and sometimes grades 7-8, and high school for grades 10-12 and sometimes grades 9-12 (Manning, 2000; Edwards, Kemp, & Page, 2014). Dissatisfaction with the junior high schools occurred during the 1950s and 1960s. William Alexander spoke at the Junior High School Conference in 1963 about the characteristics needed in schools in the middle if they were to meet the educational and developmental needs of early adolescents (Alexander, 1963). William Alexander initiated the spark that led to the development of a middle school philosophy and the middle school movement. School districts across began to reorganize their junior high schools into middle schools with a typical grades 6-8 configuration (George & Alexander, 2003; Manning, 2000; Powell, 2011; Edwards, Kemp, & Page, 2014).

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

This review of the literature on middle schools is based on the beliefs and research of the *This We Believe Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* position paper of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (2010). There are critical attributes and characteristics that guide the model for educating early adolescents. It is the belief of the AMLE that education for this age group, which is usually in the range of 10-15, must include the attributes of being developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. In addition, it is the belief of the AMLE that the essential attributes can be best achieved through 16 characteristics that are grouped in the categories of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Leadership and Organization; and Culture and Community. These characteristics are linked and should be implemented as a whole package.

4. Status of Middle Schools

Meyer (2011) expressed criticism of middle schools as being a weak link in the chain of public education. Yecke (2005, p. xxii), stated "It is time for the American public to reject the policies and practices of the radical middle school movement." She also indicated that the only real difference between the middle schools and the junior high schools is the name change and the grade organization (p. 25). Beane & Lipka (2006) shared that some school leaders in large urban areas such as Baltimore, Maryland and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania were disenchanted with poor test scores and unmanageable student behavior in their middle schools that they decided to abandon the typical middle school grade configurations and return to a K-8 grade configuration in some of their schools. This major shift fueled the media and the middle school critics in enhancing their beliefs that the middle schools were a failure. Pardini (2002) indicated that the Cleveland chief executive (then Barbara Byrd-Bennett) concluded that the teachers had not been appropriately trained to implement a true middle school philosophy, adequate resources had not been provided to support the middle school concept, and that the district's middle schools were failing. Her plan to address the situation was to phase out middle schools and replace them with K-8 elementary schools. In addition, Pardini added that the Cincinnati Public Schools, Everett Massachusetts Public Schools, and Fayetteville Tennessee Schools transitioned or planned to transition their middle schools to K-8 elementary schools.

Although the movement to abandon middle schools for a K-8 grade configuration is becoming more popular, Pardini (2002) indicated that no empirical, large-scale study has examined the relationship between grade configuration and student achievement, and the limited research on this topic is qualitative and anecdotal. In terms of principal preparation, in most states principals are prepared and licensed for grades K-12 (Gaskill, 2002; Bickmore, 2011). Many principals of middle schools had little or no prior administrative expertise on middle level issues (Anfara & Valentine, 2004; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006; Gale & Bishop, 2014). George (2006) found that often middle schools in Florida were staffed by administrators and teachers with little training specific to middle school issues. It is important that leaders working with the middle-level education have appropriate knowledge and understanding of the middle school concept, its philosophy, and the best practices that contribute to the successful education of early adolescents. Leithwood et al. (2006) advocated that talented leadership is a necessary ingredient in the success of a school's academic achievement (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011).

Meeks & Stepka (2004) surveyed middle level principals to determine if training was an obstacle or an opportunity and the principals indicated the 80.28 percent of their staffs needed training in middle level programs and that 92.6 percent of their staffs were willing to be trained. Teachers, administrators, and staff working with middle-level students must have on-going professional development on the appropriate implementation of the middle school model. There are concerns and some of the research has confirmed that all the components of the middle school model are not being implemented completely and appropriately. Musoleno & White (2010) found that the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the high-stakes testing associated with the law resulted in some middle schools changing previous developmentally appropriate practices to provide additional time for test preparation. They also indicated that electives and advisory time were often eliminated to provide time for remediation. Some researchers have studied schools that actually implemented the components of the middle school concept as a complete set, over time, and with fidelity (Anfara & Lipka, 2003; DePascale, 1997; Felner et al., 1997). These researchers found that academic achievement increased and behavior problems decreased, and the results included students who typically struggled with academics and behavior issues. Key middle school organizational structures such as interdisciplinary teams, common planning times, and advisory periods have been found by researchers to have a positive impact on student achievement (Styron & Nyman, 2008; Cashwell, 2003; Danielson, 2002; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; George & Oldaker, 1985). Other middle school practices have shown promise for improving achievement, engagement, and relationships; small teaching teams, authentic instruction, integrative curriculum, service learning, and affective mentorship (Beane & Brodbagen, 2001; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004; National Middle School Association Research Committee, 2003). Overall, the real problem related to the middle school concept is that its components have not been well implemented and rarely were they implemented as a complete set of principles and practices (Beane & Lipka, 2006).

5. Summary

Most often, the title of "middle school" has had to do more with changing the name on the front of the building instead of the implementing the middle school concepts (Beane & Lipka, 2006). It was faulty logic to think that changing the name of the school and organizing the school with grades 6-8 or grades 5-8 would ensure a better quality of education for early adolescents. Beane and Lipka (2006) also indicated that the media and critics have mistaken the practices in many schools (where the model was not implemented as originally conceived) for the middle school concept itself which was also an error. Huss & Eastep (2011) emphasizes that there must be renewed commitment to continue to recruit, train, and hire teachers and administrators with specialized knowledge about teaching early adolescents. Manning (2003) advocates that when middle level educators recognize and understand early adolescents' developmental characteristics, they will be better equipped to plan and implement educational experiences that are developmentally appropriate for middle school students. Elmore (2000) found that the greater extent of middle school implementation, the higher the level of student performance. Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne (2009) concluded that higher levels of academic achievement was found in middle schools that more fully implemented the components of the middle school concept, even in schools with varying demographics and in different locales. This study also indicated that middle schools identified as a School to Watch address the academic needs of students as well as the physical, social, and emotional needs of students. The National Middle School Association (2003) indicated that the middle school characteristics were interdependent and must be implemented in concert. The model was not meant to be implemented as a pick and choose menu. Early adolescents score the highest on high stakes standardized tests in middle schools that have implemented the middle school model (McEwin, Dickenson, & Jenkins, 2003; Faulkner, & Cook, 2006). Allen (2010, p. 7) stated "If you do certain middle grades practices, you can have higher achieving schools." Strahan (2014, Winter, p. 2) indicated that middle school students learn best when schools conscientiously implement the middle school concept. The question is asked of school leaders if it is now time to seriously reflect and address the current status of the middle school model and its future? In closing, Huss & Eastep (2011, p. 12) shares this statement "If those who teach and work with middle level students can ever succeed in moving the middle school concepts from theory to practice, we may find that the solution for meeting the academic, emotional, and social needs of young adolescents has been right there all along – we simply never unwrapped it."

6. References

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