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The Rise of the 'Elemiddle' School

Not every K-8 school genuinely applies best middle-level practices and deserves the new designation that's coming into vogue by David L. Hough

Renewed interest in the education of young adolescents has given credence to the "elemiddle" school approach to teaching and learning, which was first documented 15 years ago when I coined the term. Yet much bias, misunderstanding and misinterpretation accompanies the most recent phenomenon compelling schools nationwide to adopt the K-8 elemiddle school concept.

Many school systems conducting their own research are finding students in grades 6, 7 and 8 who attend K-8 schools, sometimes known as elemiddles, are scoring higher than their counterparts in other grade-span schools as measured by standardized achievement tests and state assessment exams.

Spurred on by accountability requirements and data-driven reform initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind legislation, schools are searching for ways to improve teaching and learning at all levels. Over the past few years many districts have discovered students in elemiddle schools outperforming students in schools with other grade-span configurations, most notably grades 5-8 and 6-8 that may be incorrectly calling themselves "middle schools."

Proponents of the latter grade-span schools now are engaged in an apparent contradiction — on the one hand saying grade spans have no relationship to philosophy, programs and student outcomes while on the other hand criticizing K-8 proponents in an effort to fend off school districts' efforts to convert to the elemiddle school concept.

Just as every 6-8 school is not a bona fide middle school, not every K-8 is an elemiddle. Only those schools configured with continuous grade spans that begin with kindergarten or pre-kindergarten and end after the 8th grade in which the upper grade spans are implementing middle-level best practices should be labeled elemiddles. Likewise, only those 6-8s and 5-8s that are fully implementing the middle school philosophy as outlined in the National Middle School Association's 2003 position paper, "This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents," should be labeled middle schools.

A Professional Threat

While many young adolescents attending elemiddle schools are outperforming their counterparts in other grade-span configuration schools, die-hard advocates for other structures feel threatened by recent efforts to give these schools a chance. This is unfortunate because educators, parents and communities that want what is best for young adolescents all too often

find themselves engaging in abstract, tradition-laden debates over shibboleth, rather than discussing meaningful adaptations that can be good for students.

If young adolescents in elemiddle schools can be more successful, if educators can more fully implement many components of the middle-level education philosophy, if parents and community members are in favor of the schools, why not consider them? Why oppose them? Why not give them a chance?

Those who claim middle-level programs are more fully implemented in 6-8 schools would be cautioned to consider the potential ramifications if this is true. If the programs and practices associated with the middle school philosophy are beneficial for students (and intuition holds and some research demonstrates that they are), then what does that say about the K-8 elemiddles that are outperforming the 5-8s and 6-8s?

My position is that schools more fully implementing the middle-level concept are the ones outperforming those that are not. I believe the successful K-8 elemiddles are the ones buying into this philosophy most fully and completely, and that's why their test scores are higher, their attendance rates improved, discipline referrals reduced and dropout rates lowered.

These findings have been documented by scores of districts across the country that have collected and analyzed school-level achievement data. This is one of the major reasons why school systems under pressure to produce higher academic achievement are examining differences among schools with different grade spans, finding better results in K-8 elemiddle schools, and then moving to the structure they have found to be most conducive to student learning.

Opposite Corners

The research I conducted and reviewed over the past 15 years suggests the answer does, indeed, lie in the implementation. However, two completely different perspectives associated with two clearly opposing schools of thought exist on this issue.

In the 6-8 corner, one position holds that too many 6-8 middle schools have not fully implemented middle school programs and practices consistent with the philosophy. Therefore, according to Sue Swaim, executive director of the National Middle School Association, in her April 2004 commentary in *Education Week*: "The middle school movement cannot be faulted for educational deficiencies it did not create and practices it did not recommend."

The other position is that 6-8s do, in fact, implement middle school programs and practices at higher levels than any other grade-span types and plenty of evidence demonstrates these

programs and practices have produced positive student outcomes. Obviously, you can't have it both ways, so a logical explanation might be that some schools are and some are not making some generalizations spurious.

The other perspective draws from a body of research that documents K-8 elemiddle schools realizing higher academic achievement and other positive student outcomes when implementing middle-level best practices in the upper grade levels of their school. Others discount these data and maintain that K-8 schools are not implementing middle-level programs consistent with the middle school philosophy as extensively as the 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools. If the latter claim is accurate, it would indeed call into question the middle school approach. The research might need to be refocused, then, in an entirely different direction— toward that of efficacy, rather than fidelity of programs, practices and policies.

Evidence Lacking

In terms of student achievement, whenever well-implemented elemiddles are compared to well-implemented middle schools, the elemiddles come out on top. Whenever well-implemented elemiddles are compared to poorly implemented middles, the elemiddles come out on top. Whenever well-implemented middles are compared to poorly implemented elemiddles, the middle schools come out on top.

In the absence of general agreement as well as a substantial body of scientific research that uses randomization and controls, conventional wisdom is necessarily invoked to address policy decisions. Much conventional wisdom abounds, but it is a fact that precious little empirical evidence drawn from national studies exists to guide policymakers.

This is not to say that middle schools have not been the subject of study. To the contrary, my research team spent almost two years examining 3,717 studies that addressed a variety of middle-level education issues, topics and questions over a 12-year period from 1991 to 2002. What we found was researchers need a variety of schools with different grade-span configurations to implement middle-level programs and best practices that are consistent with the middle school philosophy. This diversity allows researchers to conduct studies to address the relationship between programs, practice, grade spans and student outcomes (including but not limited to academic achievement, whether measured by state assessments or some other examination or test). A national data base is sorely needed to enable researchers to study issues associated with grade-span configurations in a more comprehensive, systematic and unbiased manner.

What is currently understood (and misunderstood) about elemiddle schools is largely a function of whom one chooses to believe. The research base from which I've drawn over the past 15 years indicates that bona fide elemiddle schools adhere to the middle-level philosophy to a greater degree than any other school type, including other K-8s that are not elemiddles, 5-8s, 6-

8s, 7-8s, 7-9s and 7-12s. In fact, by definition, elemiddles are implementing a more complete array of middle-level programs most fully despite findings of other researchers who report that 6-8s are where middle school programs are more fully implemented. Again, I hope these others are wrong, because if they are right, it calls into question the validity of the approach. School and classroom observations should determine whether those responding to survey questions are accurately depicting what is occurring.

When critiquing studies and reports, consider the researcher's methodologies. Did the researcher gather data that school systems had generated and supplement this with data collected from teachers and principals? Did the researcher make site visits and observations and conduct focus groups and personal interviews that address the entire spectrum of schooling practices and program components? Some have simply surveyed principals; others have based findings only on a limited number of program components (such as teaming, common planning time and professional development taken together, but in isolation), not as an entire package or full complement of middle school programs and practices.

I have discovered major discrepancies between principals' perceptions and teachers' perceptions. I also have found the study of program components and practices, en total, to be a critical factor. The entire array of programs, practices and policies that constitute a middle school or elemiddle school must be considered, not just a few choice components. In addition, the schools chosen as high implementation and low implementation must be determined via statistical procedures, not by way of intentional selection.

Before you put much stock into a study's findings, take a close and careful look at the methodology. If a questionnaire is used, take a look at the questions asked, the way they're presented and who is answering them. Examine the instrument's validity and its reliability coefficient. Take a look at the types of tests used to determine levels of statistical significance and margin of error. This will help you separate research from opinion.

While scholars have compiled a plethora of information about middle-level education, researchers have shied away from the No. 1 middle-level question asked by policymakers, that is the relationship between grade-span configuration and student outcomes, including but not limited to academic achievement. School systems of late have looked at this question.

In our 2004 policy brief, "Grade Span *Does* Make a Difference," the Institute for School Improvement researchers present findings from their review of a number of school system studies as well as their own national study drawing from a stratified random sample of 500 U.S. schools. Those who examined the relationship between grade-span configurations and student outcomes consistently found that K-8 elemiddles were producing the most desirable results.

The policy brief puts many misconceptions and misunderstandings about middle and elemiddle schools into perspective. In addition, the institute's study validates much other research in support of the middle school philosophy being implemented in K-8 elemiddle schools.

District Adoptions

Over the past two or three years, states such as Louisiana, Maine, Texas, Connecticut, Colorado and Georgia have studied the feasibility of recommending whole-sale conversion to K-8 schools. Likewise, urban school districts in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Miami, Boston, Louisville, New Orleans and San Francisco have considered moving to this approach, as have schools in Everett, Mass.; Fayetteville, Tenn.; Newark and Trenton, N.J.; Rochester, N.Y.; and Oklahoma City, Okla.

Some districts, including the New York City Public Schools, have switched most of their schools to K-8s in the hopes of creating elemiddle schools. Other districts have not proceeded, fearful the switch would cost too much money, require too much additional space or not result in a full implementation of the desired programs. (Oddly, opponents of the elemiddle movement cite these same issues, only in reverse, as reasons some schools moved to the K-8 structure— that is, to save money, maximize space and eliminate programs.)

Manhattan, Kan., just this year had a unique situation: more buildings than students to fill them. So the community sponsored its first-ever “Good Apple Symposium” — a two-day event that brought parents, community leaders, city officials and public school personnel together with educational consultants to study grade-span configuration issues in an effort to explore optimal learning environments for young adolescents. While the jury is still out in Manhattan, the conversation seems to be focused on the right issue: what is best for young adolescents. It is not focused on cost, limited facilities or a reduction in programs.

The School District of Philadelphia has adopted a long-range facilities master plan that will reduce from 20 to about a dozen its number of different grade-span configurations and by 2007 increase from 55 to 121 the number of K-8 elemiddle schools it currently operates. Philadelphia has found its young adolescent learners in elemiddle schools outperform their counterparts in the district’s other grade-span configuration schools, citing higher academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores, fewer discipline problems and higher rates of attendance.

By adopting the elemiddle school concept, the Philadelphia schools are striving to reduce school size, improve teacher quality and improve facilities— all believed to be important components of student success. In addition, the parents, community members and school personnel in Philadelphia were all involved in the process of determining what they believed was best for young adolescents.

In Ohio, Cincinnati’s and Cleveland’s well-documented conversions to K-8 schools several years ago continue to be evaluated, generally showing positive results for young adolescents. These school systems may be implementing more middle school practices in their K-8s than even they realize. Still, some continue to resist calling these successful K-8 schools elemiddles, because, as

a spokesperson for one organization threatened (for whatever reasons) by the positive outcomes, said: “Elemiddle is a term we neither endorse nor recognize.”

Nurturing Aspects

In addition to delivering on promising practices such as teaming, cross-age tutoring, integrated inquiry-based teaching and learning strategies, intramural sports programs and cooperative learning, elemiddle schools are supported by many learning communities because they are closely aligned to a more nurturing, child-centered environment commonly found in elementary schools. Their teachers often hold either elementary or middle-level teaching credentials (or both), and they generally are more receptive to professional development activities and with more commitment than many of their secondary school counterparts. Not incidentally, the lack of professional development has been cited as an oft-missing component in the 6-8 schools.

Elemiddle schools have higher levels of parent involvement, tend to be smaller in size and eliminate at least one additional transition by students across school types. If these things are beneficial to young adolescent learners (and some substantial research bases document they are), why would educators and parents be opposed to them being implemented within a K-8 school?

Opponents are fearful that elemiddle schools could suffer the same fate of many middle schools. That is, changing a school’s grade-span configuration and name alone could do more harm than good. Remember that not all K-8s are elemiddles. Middle school researchers generally agree that the mass transformation of junior highs (often with grade-spans of 7-8 or 7-9) to 6-8 middle schools in grade span and name alone did not make for bona fide middle schools.

Attention now is being directed toward learning more about the schools themselves rather than simply counting the number of grade-span and name change converts. The promising practices that have been associated with the middle school philosophy and advocated by the National Middle School Association for more than 30 years are being examined from two differing perspectives.

One camp suggests these practices were never fully implemented consistently over time by many school systems that jumped aboard the middle school bandwagon beginning in the mid-1960s. The other camp suggests the middle school philosophy has, in fact, been implemented most fully in 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools but policymakers just haven’t done a very good job of documenting their impact on student outcomes, notably academic achievement.

My research supports the former position, not the latter. Even so, this may very well be the next direction taken by researchers — to evaluate fairly and objectively in a more valid, unbiased, methodologically sound manner, the efficacy of the grassroots middle school

movement aimed at improving education for young adolescents. One thing both camps hold dear is the desire to provide the best learning environment possible for young adolescents.

In theory, again, any school with a nurturing learner-centered environment, staffed by competent, caring teachers who fully implement promising practices should be able to document positive student outcomes. Certainly, parents should be engaged in the learning process and transitions by students from one grade level to the next should not be disruptive. Students and their families have the right to a safe, healthy learning environment. Schools that can provide these things also should be able to maximize student success as measured by academic achievement, attendance and graduation rates, discipline problems, and the health, well-being and safety of well-adjusted student learners.

The debate will continue over which grade-span configuration is best for children in the middle of our vertically articulated educational system. The answer should be found in schools where middle-level promising practices are most easily and readily implemented at the highest degrees for the longest periods of time, resulting in positive student outcomes.

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