

Maglienti, Leanna

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To: Maglienti, Leanna
Subject: Middle Schools

The middle school 'philosophy' revolves around the idea that students of that age need more attention, need to be known well by teachers and need to explore academically. A group of 100 students will spend their day with four teachers. Those teachers are in an interdisciplinary team which is given common planning time during the day. Those teachers meet to talk about student progress, curriculum and activities.

In some cases, the group of 100 kids and four teachers stay together for two years. Because the kids are known well, the teachers can spot potential troubles, reward good behavior and good work and just generally notice the kids.

When it works, it works well. The key is the common planning time and the smaller class sizes.

Hope that helps.

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NMSA RESEARCH SUMMARY #4

Exemplary Middle Schools

Question: What are the components of an exemplary middle school?

Philosophy

The purpose and functions of exemplary middle schools center on the intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and physical developmental needs of young adolescents (Clark & Clark, 1993; National Middle School Association, 1995). Within a few years, young adolescents undergo rapid physical growth, changes in moral reasoning, the onset of abstract thinking, and introduction to a range of social pressures, including sex, drugs, and violence. Simultaneously, the lifelong developmental tasks of forming a personal identity or self-concept, acquiring social skills, gaining autonomy, and developing character and a set of values are begun (Irvin, 1995). Exemplary middle level programs foster appropriate programs, policies, and practices that foster the development of these tasks in positive ways.

Characteristics of successful middle schools

Exemplary middle level schools address the distinctiveness of early adolescence with various instructional and organizational features. Five key components are generally recognized by educators, associations, foundations, state boards of education, and researchers. Both empirical data and conventional wisdom support these components.

1. *Interdisciplinary teaming* refers to the organizational structure of a core of teachers assigned to the same group of students. A variety of configurations have been successful ranging from 2 - 5 team members in two, three or four subject areas. Teaming provides the structure to support two essential aspects of middle level education: (1) a positive psychosocial environment that allows flexibility and variety (Keefe et al., 1983), and heterogeneous grouping of students (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993) and (2) a structure to plan and deliver a curriculum that balances academic and humane factors (NMSA, 1995). Because teachers share the same students and have a common planning period, they are able to respond more quickly to the needs of individual students through collaboration, meeting jointly with parents, and designing thematic units which foster the transfer of ideas among disciplines and increase relevance.
2. *Advisory programs* consist of a small group of students (usually 20 or fewer) assigned to a teacher, administrator, or other staff member for a regularly scheduled meeting to discuss topics of concern to students. The purpose of this program is the development of close, trusting relationships between students and adults and to increase engagement with learning and feelings of positive self-esteem and belonging. Social and academic support activities include "discussing problems with individual students, giving career information and guidance, developing student self-confidence and leadership, and discussing academic issues, personal or family problems, social relationships, peer groups, health issues, moral or ethical issues and

NMSA RESEARCH SUMMARY #4

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multicultural issues/intergroup relations" (Mac Iver, 1990, p. 459). Teacher advisories also help create more positive school climates, develop students' self-concepts, and prevent dropouts (George & Shewey, 1994; Mac Iver, 1990)

3. *Varied instruction* includes (1) integrating learning experiences, addressing students' own questions and focusing upon real life issues relevant to the student; (2) actively engaging students in problem-solving and accommodating individual differences; (3) emphasizing collaboration, cooperation, and community; (4) seeking to develop good people, caring for others, democratic values, and moral sensitivity (NMSA, 1995). Some of the more common programs include multi-age grouping over longer periods of time, cross-age tutoring, cooperative learning, hands-on and student-centered activities; use of block time and flexible scheduling; and positive evaluations. Learning tasks are developmentally appropriate and adapted to individual differences.
4. *Exploratory programs* capitalize on the innate curiosity of young adolescents, exposing them to a range of academic, vocational, and recreational subjects for career options, community service, enrichment, and enjoyment. Exploratory topics include foreign languages, intramural sports, health, clubs, student government, home economics, technological arts, independent study projects, music, art, speech, drama, careers, consumer education, creative writing, and several other special areas.
5. *Transition programs* focus on creating a smooth change of schools for the young adolescent. Eighty-eight percent of public school students begin the middle grades in a new school, a transition which may overwhelm the coping skills of some students and "have pathogenic effects on their psychological adjustment, self-esteem, and motivation to learn" (Mac Iver, 1990). A common approach is for elementary school students to visit the middle level school they will be attending, while administrators of the elementary and middle level schools meet to discuss programs and the middle school counselors to discuss ways to help students make a smooth transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. Visits to the middle school by fifth graders were used in 90% of the 6-8 schools (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1995).

Practices

National Middle School Association (1995) believes that developmentally responsive middle level schools are characterized by:

- a shared vision
- educators committed to young adolescents
- a positive school climate
- an adult advocate for every student
- family and community partnerships
- high expectations for all

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Therefore, they provide:

- a curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- varied teaching/learning approaches
- assessment and evaluation that promote learning
- flexible organizational structures
- programs and policies that foster health, safety, and wellness
- comprehensive guidance and support services

Related Articles:

1. Chapter 1, "What Is a True Middle School?" of *Building An Effective Middle School* by Romano, L. G., & Georgiady, N. P. (1994). Madison, WI: WCB Brown & Benchmark.
2. Chapter 17, "Summary of Practices and Trends," of *Education in the middle grades: Overview of national practices and trends*, by Epstein, J. L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (1990). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
3. Clark, S. N., and Clark, D. C. (1987). Middle level programs: More than academics. *Middle School Journal*, 19(1). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

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NMSA RESEARCH SUMMARY #12:

Academic Achievement

Question: Do middle schools result in higher achievement than junior high schools?

This question addresses the academic outcomes of students in junior high schools that are organized in a manner similar to large comprehensive high schools with departmentalization, 40-50 minute periods, subject area teachers, and competitive sports, as compared to middle schools using various degrees of the five commonly endorsed practices considered essential to the middle level model of schooling: teaming, exploratory courses, co-curricular programs, adviser-advisee arrangements, and intramural activities. These delineations, however, are not consistent, as many junior highs contain middle school components and vice versa.

The issue is complex for several other reasons. The research about achievement often relates academic gains to practices and programs (Levine, Levine, & Eubanks, 1984), not type of school. These programs may exist in junior high schools or middle schools, although "true" middle schools employ the recommended practices to a greater extent. Another factor is the paucity of research in the effectiveness of practices, the difficulty of comparing studies, and weak and conflicting research methodologies (Hough, 1989). Also, the aggregation of data may wash out the effects of variables such as organization issues and other inputs as teacher and student characteristics; as a result, many studies ignore the relationships between organizations, community, and teaching-learning outcomes (Hough, 1997).

Contextual factors may also confound the effects of a specific practice, and perceptions of teachers and principals may result in biased criterion measures (Van Zandt & Totten, 1995). For example, the research on teaming exemplifies both the complexity of numerous variables affecting outcomes, the challenges of collecting useable data from teams, and the various research methods that make generalizing from several studies difficult. As a final consideration, the assumption underlying achievement is its relationship to gains made by all types of students, making relevant programs and practices which keep at-risk students above their level of vulnerability and lowers absenteeism and drop-out rate.

It is therefore understandable that studies addressing the relationship between school factors (organization/programs/ practices) and achievement show mixed results.

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Things To Look For In A Good Middle School

- 1.** Eliminates the middle grades as a mini- or junior high school organization by providing its own identity as a middle level school.
- 2.** Places students together who are more alike in their needs and characteristics through a 6-8 grade configuration rather than a 7-9 grade configuration.
- 3.** Creates "smallness within bigness" by forming teams of teachers and students into surrogate families.
- 4.** Provides a logical transition from the self-contained classroom of the elementary school setting to the departmentalization of the high school setting.
- 5.** Expands guidance and counseling services through the teacher-as-advisor concept.
- 6.** Promotes the integration of subject matter through the interdisciplinary team and common planning period concepts.
- 7.** Removes the constraints and limitations of a rigid schedule and bell system to a flexible block schedule with no predetermined time periods.
- 8.** Empowers both teachers and students to make decisions.
- 9.** Discourages the "winner/loser" or "star" system through emphasis on cooperation and collaboration.
- 10.** Provides variety through alternative delivery systems, multi-media resources, and exploratory offerings.

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Contributions 'o The Middle School From The Junior High School

1. The original goal of the junior high school was to provide a separate transition between the elementary school and the high school.
2. Another initial goal was to provide a basis for the scientific study of adolescence.
3. A new grade level pattern (7-8-9 in the case of junior high schools) was implemented to meet the social and physical needs of the age group.
4. The junior high school successfully expanded and enriched the curriculum for young adolescents.
5. A variety of exploratory programs became available to seventh and eighth graders.
6. Guidance-oriented homeroom programs were developed and put into operation.
7. Clubs and student activities based on special interests and needs were provided.
8. Junior high schools became centers for experimentation with curriculum and scheduling.
9. Opportunities for students to discover and explore special interests and aptitudes for future vocational decisions were provided.
10. The possibilities for careers in the major fields of learning were revealed to students.

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Major Distinction Between The Middle School

And The PLUS 3 Junior High School

MIDDLE SCHOOL

1. Is student-centered
2. Fosters collaboration and empowerment of teachers and students
3. Focuses on creative exploration and experimentation of subject matter
4. Allows for flexible scheduling with large blocks of time
5. Varies length of time students are in courses
6. Encourages multi-materials approach to instruction
7. Organizes teachers on interdisciplinary teams with common planning period
8. Arranges work spaces of teamed teachers adjacent to one another
9. Emphasizes both affective and cognitive development of student
10. Offers advisor/advisee teacher-oriented guidance program
11. Provides high-interest "mini-courses" during school day
12. Uses varied delivery systems with high level of interaction among students and teachers
13. Organizes athletics around intramural concept

JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

- Is subject-centered
- Fosters competition and empowerment of administrators
- Focuses on mastery of concepts and skills in separate disciplines
- Requires a regular six-period day of 50- to 55-minute periods
- Offers subjects for one semester or one year
- Depends on textbook-oriented instruction
- Organizes teachers in departments with no common planning period
- Arranges work spaces of teachers according to disciplines taught
- Emphasizes only cognitive development of student
- Offers study hall and access to counselor upon request
- Provides highly-structured activity program after school
- Uses lecture styles a majority of the time with high percentage of teacher talk time
- Organizes athletics around interscholastic concept

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Restructuring High School Studies

Studies of high schools which are restructuring in ways similar to middle level schools conclude that more caring environments of communally organized schools as compared to bureaucratically organized schools affect achievement. These studies of equitable high achievement for all types of students indicate a dominance of practices which promote teacher commitment and student engagement (Bryk, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1994). Other researchers point to the importance of the school's communitarian "ethos," providing a blend of academic and social concerns in more personalized, communally organized schools and resulting in equitable student achievement (Bryk & Discoll, 1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb, & Moe, 1990).

The academic focus of the schools with higher achievement gains lies within a social context of caring individuals who make special efforts for all students to succeed and who share common beliefs and high expectations. McLaughlin (1994) noted, "Restructuring practices then make a difference in student achievement and engagement when they support personal and sustained connections between students and adults in the school setting, and when they facilitate the sharing of knowledge about students as individuals and learners" (p.9).

These studies confirm the findings of other researchers that, although specific practices, programs, and teachers may affect student achievement, it is more likely that the combination of teacher/student interactions, practices, and programs affect student outcomes. Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) concluded, "the combined benefits of using several responsive practices simultaneously are larger than the benefits of using any one practice by itself" (p. 611).

Future Research

Van Zandt and Totten (1995) pointed out the inconclusive nature of research findings related to the effects of middle school practices. Citing the causes as an insufficient number of studies, weak research designs, difficulties of comparing studies with conflicting designs, and the effects of extraneous variables on outcomes, they conclude with Strahan (1992) that investigations of patterns among practices and contextual considerations will establish a solid research base to substantiate recommended practices.

Conclusions: What We Know

1. The issue is complex because many factors affect each study.
2. Schools which implement more *Turning Points* recommendations show greatest gains in student outcomes.
3. The aim is equitable high achievement for all types of students.
4. The interrelationship of many factors affects student outcomes.
5. There is a strong link between socioeconomic status and achievement.

Related Articles

- Hough, D., & Irvin, J. (1995). Does it work? *Middle School Journal*, 26(3), 69-70.
- Lee, V. E., & Smith, J. B. (1994). High school restructuring and student achievement. *Issues in Restructuring Schools* (Report No. 7). Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.
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Studies of Programs and Practices

Studies related to achievement and programs and practices yield varied results. Looking at the effects of teaming on achievement, two studies of the past two decades, Cotton (1982) and Armstrong (1977), concluded that neither interdisciplinary team organization nor the traditional departmental organization promoted greater student achievement. On the other hand, Bradley (1988) in an experimental study of 78 pairs of seventh graders, matched in interdisciplinary and departmental organizations, found math gains for interdisciplinary and equal reading achievement gains for both groups. Clark and Clark's (1992) meta-analysis of studies related to interdisciplinary teams of the Pontoon Transitional Design cited nine out of ten studies conducted from 1964-1972. These studies indicated gains in achievement and/or affective outcomes, although conclusions about the model were unclear. Lee and Smith (1993) used a sub-sample of 8,845 eighth graders of the NELS:88 database and found modest positive gains in achievement and engagement in academic work for students in less departmentalized environments and "more team teaching in combination with heterogeneous groups" (Van Zandt & Totten, 1995, p. 10).

Researchers (Arhar, Johnston, & Markle, 1989; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Walsh & Shay, 1993) pointed to the problems inherent in determining the effects of teaming, while Van Zandt and Totten (1995) noted inconsistent findings of team-related studies. There is also little conclusive research on the effectiveness of advisory-advisee programs on achievement.

School Studies

Two of three studies related to schools and achievement show gains for restructured middle level schools. Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, and Flowers (in press) looked at the various stages of restructuring middle schools in a longitudinal study of 1500 students and 900 teachers in schools rated on levels of implementation of recommendations of the Carnegie Council's report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). The researchers found greater student outcomes in achievement, behavior, and socio-emotional factors in schools with higher levels of implementation of *Turning Points* recommendations as compared with the more traditional approaches of junior highs.

Referring to the eight site-visit schools, Keefe, Valentine, Clark, and Irvin (1994) in a national study of leadership in middle schools successfully restructuring their middle level programs concluded, "The average scores of the eight schools generally exceeded the national norms. Student achievement as measured by reading and mathematics scores tended to exceed the national average. The percentage of students passing all courses was higher than in the national normative group... The holding power of these schools was generally very high; five of the eight schools reported that all students completed the school year" (p.63). The significance of the holding power impacts achievement when value centers on the importance of achievement gains for all types of students.

Hough (in press) examined 80 community-based or consolidated rural schools for relationships between middle school and demographic variables. He found significant correlations between socioeconomic status of students and achievement, confirming previous SES achievement findings.

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