



It Isn't About Middle Schools Going Out of Fashion.

It Isn't About Grade Configuration.

## ***IT'S ABOUT EDUCATING YOUNG ADOLESCENTS!***

In recent weeks, National Middle School Association (NMSA) has fielded a variety of questions related to grade configurations as stories have appeared in newspapers about some systems moving from middle schools to K-8 schools. "Are middle schools going out of style?" or "Is NMSA against K-8 schools?" are examples of some of the questions. Our answer to these questions is a resounding NO because middle level education is not about grade configuration; rather it is about providing the educational programs young adolescents need wherever they are housed.

Policymakers, parents, and some educators would like to find a quick and simple answer to the challenges facing our nation's middle schools, but educating young adolescents is a complex undertaking with no single-strategy answer. Despite that reality, some communities have increased their focus on the grade configurations for schools serving young adolescents with the hope that grade configuration alone will adequately address the challenges of educating this age group.

Unfortunately, many schools bearing the name "middle school" have not embraced the entire range of recommendations that research has shown to be effective in raising academic achievement. Likewise, there are K-8 schools and 7-12 schools that have not specifically focused on the programs, practices, and learning needs of this age group.

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Why the apparent rush in some districts to dismantle middle schools? Often, it is because school districts are seeking a way to improve test scores. While these efforts may be guided by good intentions, they do not deal with the genuine curricular and instructional concerns that are the source of inadequate student achievement; instead, they deal with reducing costs, securing credentialed staff, and balancing student class sizes.

"There is a looming danger that districts with unsuccessful middle schools will simply move young adolescents to elementary schools as a 'quick fix' instead of taking the steps necessary to make their middle schools highly successful," C. Kenneth McEwin and associates remind us in their new research study, *Programs and Practices in K-8 Schools: Do They Meet the Educational Needs of Young Adolescents?* (NMSA, 2004). This study shows that K-8 schools are less likely to provide the educational features known to be appropriate for young adolescents than separate middle schools. It also revealed that 84% of current K-8 principals surveyed for this study favored separately organized middle schools.

So, let's be clear about one thing. If we do not provide what research, cumulative practice, and common sense tell us is appropriate for young adolescent learners, we will not attain the academic progress needed—no matter what grade configuration houses these students.

Therefore, we ask you to join with NMSA to shed light on the real needs of young adolescent learners and to encourage the creation of policies that enable every school educating 10- through 14-year-olds to:

- Engage every student in a relevant and challenging curriculum in an environment that fosters respectful and supportive relationships among students, faculty, families, and the community.
- Provide teachers and administrators who are specifically prepared and committed to teaching this age level.
- Offer ongoing professional development for all faculty and staff.
- Make decisions based on data that guides student learning and instructional practice.
- Build strong, two-way partnerships between schools and families.

Successful education for students in grades 5-8 does not depend on grade configuration so much as what goes on in the classroom. The middle school concept, the heart of NMSA's work, provides a solid agenda for ways to improve schools to create learning communities that will develop the skills, talents, and academic growth of every student. Changing grade configuration, without focused attention to these other factors, does not provide a viable shortcut to achieving the education young adolescents deserve.



**National Middle School Association**  
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