

EDUCATION WEEK

American Education's Newspaper of Record

Volume XXIII, Number 32 • April 21, 2004

© 2004 Editorial Projects in Education

Strength in the Middle

New Grade Configurations Won't Improve the Education of Young Adolescents

By Sue Swaim

Advocating for middle-grades education makes me sometimes feel like the young adolescents we serve: excited by the possibilities of growth and maturity, yet perplexed by other people's frequent criticisms and cautions.

A few recent examples:

In her book *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America's Middle Schools*, Cheri Pierson Yecke asserts that middle-level educators, through "forced" implementation of cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and heterogeneous grouping, are endangering the education of all middle school students, especially those who are gifted. Responding to a book of this nature, which relies on inflammatory language and distorted evidence to make its case, is difficult, to say the least. That Ms. Yecke's book was released while she serves as Minnesota's commissioner of education is even more disturbing. (A full response to the book is available at www.nmsa.org.)

The RAND Corp., in early March, released "Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School," a much more balanced report, but one that also relies on limited research and logical fallacies to suggest, among other things, that middle schools be replaced by K-8 schools to eliminate the transitions young adolescents experience as they advance through grade levels.

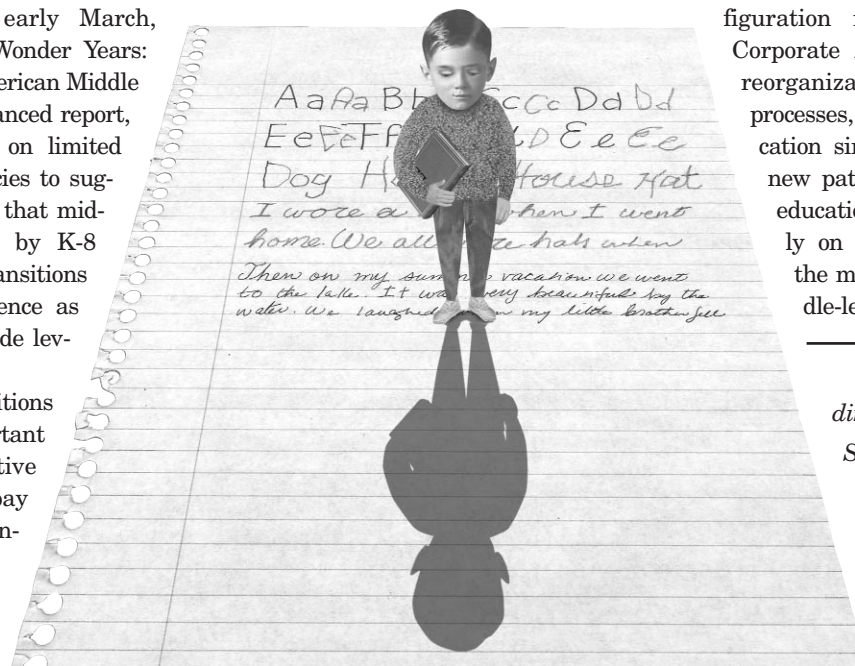
Ensuring smooth transitions for students is an important responsibility, and effective middle-level educators pay careful attention to the ten-

sions young adolescents may experience in the midst of change. But school structure is not, in and of itself, the answer. Students face unsettling transitions in any school environment, whether moving to a new wing of a K-12 school building or leaving an elementary school classroom where they learned all of their core subjects from one teacher. The key is taking proactive steps to nurture and guide young adolescents as they mature, which is one of the fundamental principles of the middle school movement.

The middle school movement cannot be faulted for educational deficiencies it did not create and practices it did not recommend.

Yet, rather than address the conditions that can cause problems in middle schools—large class sizes, an overcrowded curriculum, inconsistent professional development for teachers, and more—districts have adopted a strange amalgam of grade configurations for students ages 10 to 15. For example, New York City, the nation's largest school system, has announced plans to eliminate up to two-thirds of its middle schools and replace them with both K-8 grade schools and high schools serving students in grades 6-12. In the Kansas City area, overcrowding and tight budgets have caused districts to try a wide range of grade-level structures, such as 6th grade centers, 9th grade centers, and combined middle school/junior high centers.

Many of these efforts may be guided by good intentions, but their emphasis is misdirected. Why do education leaders look at grade configuration as the first step to school improvement? There is no definitive research available that says one grade configuration is preferable to another. Corporate America understands that reorganization without regard to processes, personnel, and resource allocation simply shuffles problems into new patterns. The same is true for education. Focusing our inquiry solely on grade configuration ignores the more important issues in middle-level schools: the need for chal-



Sue Swaim is the executive director of the National Middle School Association, based in Westerville, Ohio.

lenging and relevant curriculum, instruction, and assessment in every classroom; ongoing, job-embedded professional development for all teachers; positive relationships with adult advocates for all students; and strong, two-way communication between families and educators.

Even though we have made great strides in improving the conditions for learning in middle schools, I know that much work remains. But let's be clear about what the scope of that work should include.

The reality is that bearing the title "middle school" and enrolling students in grades 5-8 or 6-8 has never meant that an education community is implementing all the recommended middle school practices. In fact, nationwide, many middle schools took the name while only adopting selected middle school practices, rather than focusing on their full integration. Despite our best efforts, most have not embraced the entire range of recommendations that research has shown to be effective in raising academic achievement.

The middle school movement cannot be faulted for educational deficiencies it did not create and practices it did not recommend. Critics should instead be helping us ensure that all middle-level schools use proven methods of addressing the intellectual, emotional, and social needs of young adolescents. The framework for effective middle schools is delineated in "This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents," the 2003 edition of the NMSA's position paper, and "Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century," Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis' update of the Carnegie Corporation's landmark report on middle-grades education.

Middle-level schools also must have highly skilled teachers and administrators who understand the characteristics unique to young adolescents. As the RAND study correctly notes, many middle school teachers and principals do not have sufficient knowledge of the developmental stages of young adolescents. Some lack strong backgrounds in the subjects they are expected to teach and the collaborative practices they are supposed to use, a deficiency not surprising, given that most have little time in their daily schedules to plan interdisciplinary lessons, sharpen their skills, or work with team

members. In a recent study of 8,300 middle-grades teachers in four states, University of Illinois researchers Nancy Flowers and Steven Mertens found that the frequency and depth of most professional development falls "well short of meeting [these teachers'] needs."

And as the NMSA has pointed out, most teachers who work with young adolescents do not have specific middle-level certification or licensure. While the RAND report calls for extensive professional development for current educators, it misses a major opportunity by not calling for middle-level licensure in every state and the aggressive expansion of middle-level preservice teacher education programs. Specific-to-the-field preservice education, licensure, and ongoing professional development is the combination needed to address both the short-term and long-term needs of middle-level educators.

Why do critics blame the middle school movement for these gaps? Middle school advocates have worked for more than 30 years to improve the professional development of teachers and principals who work with young adolescents. Two of the 14 characteristics of a successful middle school are: "high expectations for every member of the learning community" and "educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so." The truth is that policies from federal, state, and local government create the conditions that impair teachers' effectiveness. Some of these include cutting funds and restricting opportunities for ongoing professional development, cramming 1,000-plus students into middle schools without supporting the implementation of personalized small learning communities, and hiring teachers based on the flexibility of their state certifications instead of their knowledge of young adolescents.

We need to persuade voters, elected officials, and other policymakers that helping teachers refine their skills throughout the year should be a valued—and fully funded—part of each school's improvement plan. No other expenditure will do more to raise student achievement. And we should be championing the need for specific, middle-level credentialing for new teachers in the field. Since we expect it for every other level of education, why not for this critical phase?

We also must insist that professional development not be restricted to the one or two designated days during the year many districts offer. The National Staff Development Council recommends that school districts dedicate at least 10 percent of their budgets—excluding salaries and benefits—to professional development, and that they devote at least 25 percent of a teacher's work time to learning and collaborating with colleagues. We concur.

Moreover, we think that all middle-grades teachers, both new and experienced, must have access to professional development with a balanced approach that includes both deep understanding of their content areas and sound instructional methods for young adolescent students. They also need a wide range of professional-development options: attending workshops, observing master teachers in their classrooms, receiving on-the-job coaching from specialists, participating in online tutorials and other technology-based study sessions, and more.

Education in the middle grades will improve only when everyone involved is held accountable. This means not letting politicians off the hook when they champion education in their campaigns but fail to fully fund school programs once they get into office. It means not forgetting the important contributions parents must make by sending their children to school ready to learn. And it means not becoming distracted by those whose primary objective is to divide, not unite, the efforts under way to strengthen this crucial level of schooling and make middle schools the pride of American education. ■

Reprinted with permission from Education Week, Vol. XXIII, Number 32, April 21, 2004, by The Reprint Dept., 800-259-0470

EDITORIAL & BUSINESS OFFICES:
*Suite 100, 6935 Arlington Road
 Bethesda, MD 20814
 (301) 280-3100
 FAX Editorial (301) 280-3200
 FAX Business (301) 280-3250*

Education Week is published 43 times per year by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Subscriptions: U.S.: \$79.94 for 43 issues. Canada: \$135.94 for 43 issues. © 2004 Editorial Projects in Education
