



## **National Middle School Association**

**Headquarters Office** 4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300 Westerville, Ohio 43081  
TEL 614-895-4730 FAX 614-895-4750 1-800-528-NMSA [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org)

**Washington, DC Office** 1940 Duke Street, 2nd Floor Alexandria, Virginia 22314

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Dear Colleague,

Nearly two-thirds of the nation's public middle level schools currently include grades six through eight, an arrangement that is most conducive to implementing interdisciplinary teaming with common planning time, flexible scheduling, exploratory programs, advisory programs, and other recommended practices. In a recent national survey, a majority of middle level administrators in both K-8 and 6-8 middle schools said that a separate middle school is the best organizational structure for young adolescents, ages 10 to 15. In fact, only 16% of the current K-8 administrators said the K-8 structure was the best one for young adolescents, while 84% urged implementing a 5-8 or 6-8 structure staffed by professionals specifically prepared for and focused on educating young adolescents. Among the reasons they offered:

- Students in grades 5-8 have physical, intellectual, and social needs that are quite different from those of students in elementary grades.
- Elementary and middle school teachers have distinctive instructional philosophies and practices that don't necessarily work well in both settings.
- A K-8 structure is less likely to help middle level students prepare for high school.

In view of these conditions, you can understand why there is concern regarding the recent push in communities across the country to make the middle grades an appendage of elementary schools or high schools. For example, New York City, the nation's largest school system, plans to eliminate up to two-thirds of the city's 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 sixth grade centers, ninth grade centers, and combined middle school/junior high centers. Additional cities, such as New Orleans, are dissolving their middle schools because school officials think "a change of environment is the solution" (*The Times-Picayune*, August 26, 2004).

Many of these efforts may be guided by good intentions as well as by economic considerations, but they are short-sighted at best. Successful education for young adolescents, students in grades 5-8, does not depend on a grade configuration within a school but what goes on in those classrooms and within those schools. Young adolescents will neither progress academically nor improve socially unless we provide exactly what we know makes a difference—highly skilled teachers and administrators who understand these students, have the appropriate content knowledge, and employ instructional methods that best help their students learn.

Among the research-based practices necessary for implementing high quality and effective education for young adolescents are active learning for students and teachers; challenging and relevant curriculum; regular time for teaching teams to meet and plan together; ongoing professional development that connects directly with what teachers need and how students are learning; and, strong, two-way partnerships between schools and families.

Let's be clear about one thing. If we do not provide what research, cumulative wisdom, and common sense says is appropriate for young adolescent learners, we will not attain the progress needed—no matter what grade configuration these students are housed in. "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 school highly successful," C. Kenneth McEwin and associates remind us in their new book, *Programs and Practices in K-8 Schools: Do They Meet the Educational Needs of Young Adolescents?* (National Middle School Association, 2004).

Unfortunately, many middle level schools have not embraced the entire range of recommendations that research has shown to be effective in raising academic achievement, and as outlined in such publications as *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, the 2003 edition of NMSA's position paper, and *Turning Points 2000*, the Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis update of the Carnegie Corporation's landmark report on middle grades education. Likewise, there are K-8 schools that have not focused on the specific characteristics and needs of young adolescent learners.

So, why rush to dismantle middle schools? Too often, it is because it's an inexpensive, yet highly visible action that temporarily masks problems and distracts the community and policymakers from dealing with the real issues in America's middle schools. These issues include large class sizes, a cramped curriculum, inadequate preservice teacher preparation, inconsistent professional development for teachers and administrators, and a failure to recognize the broad goals of middle level education and the distinctive group of students it serves.

Although there have been great strides in improving the conditions for learning in middle level schools, much work remains. The reality is that educating young adolescents is a very complex matter. Moving from a middle level grade configuration to a K-8 grade configuration, in and of itself, will not adequately address the challenges of educating today's 10- to 15-year-olds. We ask you to join us in the substantive and meaningful work that sheds light on the real needs and creates policies that enable all schools to provide:

- High quality professional development for teachers that is part of the regular school day, directly related to their instructional needs, and available throughout the year.
- Challenging and relevant curriculum, instruction, and assessment in every classroom.
- Positive relationships with adult advocates for every student.
- Strong, two-way communication between families and educators.

Sincerely,



Sue Swaim  
Executive Director  
National Middle School Association

# RESEARCH IN SUPPORT OF MIDDLE LEVEL GRADE CONFIGURATION

## NMSA BELIEFS

### **National Middle School Association strongly believes that:**

- Middle level education is not about grade configuration, but rather about effective programs and practices, like interdisciplinary teaming and integrated curriculum, that are developmentally appropriate for young adolescents.
- Successful schools for young adolescents are staffed with teachers who are prepared to teach young adolescents and do so in an environment that is academically challenging, socially equitable, and developmentally responsive.

## CURRENT RESEARCH FINDS

- The number of schools with a middle grades organization (i.e., grades 5-8 or 6-8) has grown from 23% in 1971 to 69% in 2000 (Valentine, 2000).
- A 2003 national study of over 100 K-8 schools found that 84% of K-8 respondents believe that the ideal grade organization for middle grades students is a separately organized middle school. Further, only 16% of K-8 school respondents believe that the ideal grade organization for young adolescents is a K-8 school (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2004).
- A 2000 national study of middle level schools found that 65% of middle level principals believed that the ideal grade organization for the middle grades was grades six through eight (Valentine, Clark, Hackman, & Petzko, 2002).
- Middle schools are more likely than other grade organizations to offer programs and practices such as interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, advisory programs, and a wide variety of elective courses, considered to be essential for effective education of young adolescents (Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; McEwin & Alexander, 1990; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2004).
- Young adolescents in middle schools are more likely to be taught by an interdisciplinary team. In fact, 77% of middle schools and only 33% of K-8 schools reported using interdisciplinary team organization in the middle grades (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2004)
- Several large scale and comprehensive studies demonstrate that young adolescents who attend middle schools that use essential programs and practices like interdisciplinary teaming have higher achievement scores (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998).

## ACTION STEPS/RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Provide adequate funding for teacher professional development throughout the year, as well as insist that schools dedicate a minimum of 10 percent of their budgets to professional development and at least 25 percent of a teacher's work time to learning and collaborating with colleagues.
- 2) Insist that new middle grades teachers receive specialized professional preparation and establish middle level certification for all new teachers.
- 3) All schools enrolling young adolescents should establish and maintain programs and practices such as challenging and relevant curriculum, interdisciplinary teaming, integrated curriculum, and teacher-based guidance programs, which have been shown to increase student success and achievement.



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Westerville, Ohio 43081  
Phone: (800) 528-NMSA  
Fax: (614) 895-4750  
www.nmsa.org  
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