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ABSTRACT
        During 1968-91, middle schools were the only school
type to grow in number, increasing by over 400 percent. Middle school
advocates focus on early adolescents' need for developmentally
appropriate institutions, but show only a weak historical
understanding of the emergence and status of middle schools. Critical
factors in early support for the middle school movement included
urban interests in countering de facto school segregation without use
of busing, urban overcrowding of elementary and high schools, and a
"bandwagon effect"--the desire to appear modern and reform oriented.
The emergence of rural middle schools under the cloak of
psychological progress can be destructive to both the declining sense
of community in America, and to the actual persistence of many rural
communities still organized around K-8 or K-6 public elementary
schools. Examination of the National Center for Education
Statistics's Common Core of Data indicates that the construction of
rural middle schools has led to the closing and consolidation of
rural elementary schools. During the school years 1987/88-1991/92 the
proportion of schools that were middle schools increased 20 percent
in rural areas, was unchanged in suburban areas, and decreased 6
percent in urban areas. At the same time, the proportion of rural
schools that were K-8 declined precipitously. Emerging school reform
agendas that provide alternatives to the "inevitability" of
consolidation include efforts to restructure schools as caring
communities (requiring active parent and community participation),
and the development of rural schools as centers for integrated social
services. Contains 52 references. (SV)

The Cultural Contradictions of Middle Schooling
for Rural Community Survival

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> Today, it is clear that the middle school has
> moved into the organizational mainstream and
> is likely to continue to dominate
> intermediate education as educators prepare
> for the twenty-first century. As of the
> early 1990s, a body of literature,
> associations, conferences, and legislation
> all are emerging to promote the middle school
> concept and philosophy (Wiles and Bondi,
> 1993; vii).

Many educators welcome the announcement that middle grade

schooling has once again moved from being "subject-centered" to

"learner-centered." Available data on contemporary school

organization in the U.S. also supports the notion that middle

schools are popular organizational forms. Between 1968 and 1991,

middle schools were the only school type to grow in number. In

point of fact, the number of identified middle schools increased

by over 400 percent during this era (from 2,080 to 8,545)

according to the U.S. Department of Education. Meanwhile, the

total number of U.S. schools dropped from 94,197 to 81,746 during

this period, and the number of elementary and junior high

schools--from which the middle school grades were usually

gathered--dropped from 67,186 to 59,015 and from 7,437 to 4,561

respectively (NCES, 1992). Clearly, in terms of numbers, the

"middle school phenomenon" is no illusion.

Those who assert the benefits of middle schooling claim that irrefutable evidence proves that early adolescents "need" developmentally appropriate institutions:

> This time [preadolescence] is of immense importance in the development of the young person. Biologically, young adolescents experience puberty, a period of growth and development more rapid than in any other phase of life except infancy. Over four or five years, dramatic changes occur in height, weight, and body composition, and young people acquire the capacity to reproduce. Youth enter puberty at a significantly younger age today than in previous generations. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, p. 21)

Lack of an institution designed to take specific account of such characteristics, the middle school advocates argue, seriously handicaps preadolescents' learning endeavors. For example:

> Preadolescence is a restless age for girls and boys. The torture of trying to sit still in school is obvious, and some pupils learn to perform remarkable feats of contortion without falling out of their chairs. Therefore, a school atmosphere in which physical movement is integral to the educative process is of high priority for the preadolescent. Activity-related learning (for example drawing, designing, constructing, and making displays), as well as moving from classroom to library or from classroom to play center, is vital to the preadolescent. In other words, a steady grind at the school desk is undesirable at this restless age (Wiles and Bondi, p. 35).

Of course, though such attributions pertain to many preadolescents, they also pertain to most children; and it is equally true most adults tire of a "steady grind" at a desk, regardless of age. The behaviors so commonly attributed to

preadolescents may well result more from societal norms of childrearing than from inherent developmental transformations. These norms, in fact, shape how Americans organize instruction--including the forms actually assumed and the functions actually undertaken in middle schools.

Misunderstanding the Organization of Instruction

The middle school movement is clearly a strong and vital feature of school reform in the late twentieth century, although its future is less secure than advocates may wish (Cuban, 1993). And, those of us who work in rural places may choose rather to work for its demise than for its expansion.

Middle school champions show only a weak historical understanding of the emergence and status of this organizational form. They may be least well-placed to predict the future. Middle school advocates are typically developmentalists who believe that schools are or ought to be dedicated to instructional objectives posed by the nature and interests of the learners themselves (Kliebard, 1986). They believe that school reform is (and ought to be) driven by advances in scientific understanding of the nature of childhood (or preadolescence, in this case).

The historical institution of mass schooling, however, both in America and world-wide, has not been implemented to nurture the personal fulfillment and satisfaction of young people. Rather, cognitive and behavioral sciences are usually used to

advise and improve institutional <u>means</u>, not for the consideration
of desirable <u>ends</u> or goals. The aims of mass schooling--arguably
pioneered in the U.S.--concern the development of narrowly
defined behaviors and technical capacities congruent with
interpretations of the national interest (Meyer, Benavot, Cha,
Kamens, & Wong, 1992). One of us shows in a forthcoming work how
such aims, even when couched in the language of "academic rigor,"
implement schooling as an anti-intellectual regimen (Howley,
Howley, & Pendarvis, in press).

Middle school advocates seem to overlook such issues, for
they fail to comprehend the social context of their of their
work. Wiles and Bondi, for example, suggest the myopia
frequently adhered to by devout developmentalists when they claim
"a successful middle school depends more on faculties than on
facilities, more on people than on the purse (p.1)." In pages
ahead, we will suggest that exactly the reverse is true with
respect to the status of rural American communities. In these
places, facilities and purses attendant to the construction of
middle schools often have devastating effects.

Capturing a Historical Dimension

The general problem of untangling (or at least
investigating) purpose and direction of school reform in the
U.S., we believe, is well considered by the recent work of
Herbert Kliebard (1986). Kliebard describes American school
reform efforts over much of the last century as a series of

contests between four contending world views over the means and
ends of schooling. The four contending camps, he claims, are
those of humanists, developmentalists, social efficiency
advocates, and social meliorists. Although Kliebard's analysis
centered upon competing curricular perspectives between 1896 and
1953, similar forces compel the battles within school reform
movements today (Howley et al., in press).

In the age (largely in the 18th century and earlier) when
formal education beyond the rudiments represented the aspirations
of the landed gentry, an appreciation of the liberal arts and
humanities were synonymous with schooling. Later advocates for
school reform who held such commitments were Humanists, according
to Kliebard. Their influence began to wane early in the century,
under the assault of more practical or more pressing concerns--
scientific, economic, and social. Among those who claim
allegiance (a quite dubious allegiance according to Moretti,
1993) are conservative critics of schooling like Ed Hirsch and
former Secretary of Education William Bennett (1989).

Late nineteenth century humanists were attacked as outmoded
by both the developmentalists and those who saw the role of
school as critical to developing students as resources for
economic and institutional progress of the culture. Today's
middle school advocates make the same sorts of Developmentalist
arguments for restructuring adolescent learning environments as
their early twentieth century ancestors did for establishing
graded elementary schools and junior high schools in the era of

the First World War. While internal disputes among Developmentalists were important, in essence they all agreed that whatever passed for education had to have its origin within the mind and experience of the child. Education could not and should not be imposed from without, for all children go through stages of mental, physiological and psychological development which determines what and when they can learn. Like today's middle school spokespersons, they presented evidence for such views based on advances in the scientific study of children and their "needs."

On the other hand, social efficiency advocates, in Kliebard's account, claimed to be more pragmatic in their educational concerns, and insisted that schools ought not be created for the good of the child, but for the good of a changing and economically diversifying economic and social structure. Investments in public schooling needed to have an eye to the payoff for society for such investments, and whatever got taught in the public school, they reasoned, demanded real-world vocational and social utility. And, they insisted, whatever was taught must be taught efficiently and effectively. Outcomes-based education in the school reform rhetoric of today well illustrates the concerns of this increasingly powerful perspective.

Kliebard labels his final category of historical school reformers as social meliorists. These folk believed that improving the social condition of children born to poverty and

neglect ought to be the primary focus of public schools. And
they believed that public schools could and should be the agency
which investigated and helped to solve the social problems of the
day. Social meliorists argued that the humanists were to tied to
the past; that the social efficiency folks would primarily
enhance the mindless economic development trajectories of a
culture losing touch with human and community needs; and that
developmentalism might elucidate some educational means, but had
nothing to say about desirable social aims of schooling.

Schools for Preadolescents in the Twentieth Century

Kliebard's analysis of school reform to mid-twentieth
century tells us little about the middle school per se. His work
focuses primarily on the secondary school, and he ends his
historical account before middle schools (by that name) emerged.
His key point, however, is central: understanding the nature and
dynamics of school reform is a complex task. In particular, such
understanding is impossible without a keen appreciation of the
contradictory ideological commitments that shape reformism.
Initiatives launched under the officially sanctioned banners of
school improvement (e.g., "systemic reform" in our own day) carry
ideological commitments often in opposition to the school
improvement proposals and hopes of other groups, both formal and
informal. We only get significant educational reform, Kliebard
argues, when contending parties find some common ground or larger
cultural issue that demands an institutional response in which

contending educational camps can simultaneously find sufficient room for parts of their agendas. And, since school reform for the sake of school reform has become a cultural obsession, an institution in itself, since the 1960s, it is quite likely that the public has come to expect that educational "innovation" is the norm for practice in schooling.

For those of us who deal with rural schools and rural education, however, the continuing infatuation with school "improvement" and school reform presents, at best, ambiguous opportunities and, at worst, an outright threat to the public good. We are often witness to officially instigated school improvement efforts, by both state and federal governments, that transform the very meaning of schooling in the eyes of the communities we are familiar with. Sometimes this transformation is little understood and little welcomed--school consolidation being an excellent example (DeYoung, 1994; Smith and DeYoung, 1988).

Before turning to the cultural contradictions of middle schooling for our many remaining but struggling rural communities, we want to first review serious weaknesses in the logic and rhetoric of middle schooling and its "philosophy."

Junior High Schools: Precursors of the Middle School

The fact that there are and always have been competing perspectives for the ends of schooling (e.g., as with Kliebard's four-part scheme) belies all claims that the dominion of middle

schools is in any way inevitable. We should also note that the "torture" of having to sit through instructional periods dominated by teachers is reported by not only preadolescents, but also by younger and older children and by graduate students of our acquaintance. Formal schooling has never been designed by adults primarily for the benefit of children as the children themselves would define it. John Dewey early on recognized that this misconstruction of his supporters (i.e., irresponsibly putting children in charge of the curriculum) was a dangerous one (Cremin, 1961); and given the choice, few if any children would come to any institution that adults called "school." And this observation is as true now as it has always been.

This much aside, advocates for a distinct formal level between the elementary and high school are not new, and in fact have been around since the early 1900s. However, both the ideological underpinnings and formal control of such institutions has changed throughout this century. Larry Cuban argues that concerns about the academic and college-prep orientation of high schools (inheritors of the purposes of the private academies that had appeared nearly everywhere in the early 1800s) shortly after the turn of the 20th century precipitate the junior high movement.

Advocates of the junior high school believed that social adjustment and rudimentary training in occupational skills were key pedagogical purposes lacking in high schools, for high schools during this period were increasingly attempting to

position themselves as preparatory to higher education (Cuban, 1993). These dynamics all occurred in an age, of course, when high school completion was still the exception and not the rule-- during the 20th century, proportional growth in enrollments was almost entirely due to the increased numbers of 14-18 year olds attending the newly constructed public high schools. The 19th century had, in fact, provided a successful basic education to most of the population outside the South and Southwest (where African Americans and Mexican Americans were excluded).

The junior high movement was thus a distinctly urban effort to create intermediary institutions designed to feed a few students into college-bound tracks and enabling many others to acquire social and occupational "skills" deemed needful for a functional urban social life. Thus, the junior high school was an urban institutional response to the hypothetical needs of atomized children in our central cities. Because rural places were losing population rather than gaining, and because the linkage between junior high and local occupations was less clear, separate junior highs in rural places were less likely to emerge, and when they did, they were often housed in the same building as town high schools. Departmentalized junior highs were comparatively rare in rural America until the 1950s when school consolidation began to make them economically feasible in some areas.

By the 1930s and 1940s, junior high schools and senior high schools had increasingly become terminal institutions: Entry

into the work force often involved formal public instruction at
the secondary level. In Kliebard's view, industrial and
vocational agriculture programs were as often as not the reason
students attended secondary schools, but often they left
secondary schools (i.e., "dropped out") when favorable employment
was secured. By the late 1950s, however, secondary schools were
increasingly successful in preparing high-school students for
college entry (Trow, 1959); at least, greater numbers of citizens
were taking part in postsecondary schooling, just as, previously,
greater numbers had begun to take part in secondary schooling.

Part of this "success" might be due to the control of junior
high schools by senior high administrators. Faced with mounting
pressure to successfully graduate their students, senior high
principals and superintendents had transformed the junior high
curriculum between the 1920s and 1960s into academic courses
preparatory to high school entrance and completion, thus
undermining their initial pedagogical aims (Cuban, 1993).

Developmentalism and the Middle School?

The 1960s saw a reawakening of interest in the developmental
needs of middle adolescence (Beane, 1990; Alexander, 1968).
Invariably, advocates for middle schooling explain its importance
in developmental terms, arguing that the special circumstances
and needs of young adolescence require more opportunity for
maturation and growth than is available in elementary school, but
less rigor and competition than is available in the high school.

As suggested earlier, such claims are typically defended with reference to advances in psychological research, research which advocates use to underscore their interests in a new organizational form:

> Finally, in the early 1960s the forces of human development research were pushing American education closer to a reformation of both the purpose and structure of schooling. Of particular influence were the translations of Jean Piaget's work, a major study of human development from ten to fourteen by the University of California at Berkeley, and the first efforts to integrate this nation's schools.
>
> By 1965, the United States was "primed" for the invention of a number of new educational programs including early childhood education, middle school education, gifted education, and special education. All of these new programs shared the common denominator of being focused on human growth and development, and collectively they ushered in a new era of American education (1993; 4).

While romantic and progressive notions of middle school formation can clearly be seen in these passages, in fact it was the economic and social concerns of America's cities that were primarily responsible for today's middle school movement. Even supporters of middle schools agree that various urban economic and social concerns were critical in early support for the movement. These included: (1) interests in creating a new organizational form to counter the effects of de-facto segregation in our cities without increased use of busing; (2) efforts at creating new organizational structures to deal with urban overcrowding of high and elementary schools; and (3) a "bandwagon effect" where the middle school concept appearing in

one city led to demand in other places to be likewise reform
oriented (Wiles and Bondi, 1993). In a culture where all school
systems are attempting to appear modern, "going to the middle
school concept" has now become de rigueur.

Critiquing the Middle School Movement

The rhetoric of middle schoolers continues to involve the
social adjustment of youngsters. While this concern may be
admirable, supporters of middle schools delude themselves on this
basis. America has never constructed social institutions solely
for the psychological needs of children. Formal institutions
like schools emerge only when social change undermines, engulfs,
or sweeps away previously serviceable institutional patterns. We
remain convinced that desegregation concerns, school enrollment
pressures, and the "bandwagon effect" better explain the
emergence of middle schools as institutions than does concern for
preadolescent development. We admit, however, that the
developmental rhetoric helps smooth the way.

In addition, the "softening" of schools for preadolescents--
that is, reorienting the middle-level schooling to development
and allegations of individual psychological appropriateness--has
not been a trend reserved for former junior high students. It
also occurred in secondary schools during the past three decades
(Cusick, 1983). From the mid 1960s and up until quite recently,
for instance, high schools often responded to demands to educate
all students by diversifying their curriculum and lowering

academic standards for students while explaining such
institutional changes as functions of student development and
interest (Sizer, 1984). Although many students continued in
college preparatory programs, students not considered capable of
college entry were given elective programs where alternate career
paths could be considered and where student "psychological needs"
were frequently the focus of school improvement efforts (e.g.,
Cusick, 1983; Jackson, 1992).

The language of school improvement for "at-risk" populations
in our comprehensive high schools today, for instance, often
approximates the language of middle school advocates, and it
sounds this way not because of psychological breakthroughs, but
arguably because of the special problems most public schools face
when charged to educate all local students, not just those
intending college enrollment.

Consequences of Middle Schooling for Rural Community Survival

Critiquing the need for middle schools as presented by their
defenders is relatively easy. But more is at stake in rural
America than an intellectual argument over the aims of middle
schooling. Rather, on two accounts, the emergence of middle
schools under the cloak of psychological progress can be
destructive to both the declining sense of community in America,
and to the actual persistence of many rural communities still
organized around K-8 or K-6 public schools.

Incredibly, Wiles and Bondi (1993, p. 6) suggest such

organizational forms were eliminated in America decades ago.
Nonetheless, K-8 and K-6 schools are still common, if threatened,
throughout rural America today. And many rural communities in
the U.S. cling stubbornly to their remaining schools as social
centers; but talk of "improving" school systems by "moving to a
middle school concept" can directly threaten rural elementary
schools and by default those communities which lie around them.

Implications of Middle Schooling for Small Communities

Based upon fieldwork in numerous school districts,
particularly southern county school districts, the promise (or
threat) of building middle schools is often problematic (DeYoung,
1991a; DeYoung, 1994). On one hand, rural school districts--
typically at the behest of state education departments--often
participate in nationally inspired school reform efforts. And,
having a middle school often symbolizes an educationally
progressive posture. On the other hand, school districts with
small or declining student enrollments frequently have numerous
small elementary schools that were formed themselves in decades
past by consolidating even smaller two- and three-room schools.
Often, the remaining small elementary schools have only one or
two classes per grade level, and such schools commonly comprise
either K-6 or K-8 grade configurations. State and local
education agencies are likely to target just such schools for
consolidation (combination and closure) as student enrollments
drop.

Teachers and school superintendents often maintain that
larger schools are typically better schools, or at least they are
more cost-effective to operate (Monk, 1991). In many county
districts (counties are the norm for school districts in the
Southeast), curricular breadth and efficiency arguments continue
to serve as acceptable warrants for consolidation efforts,
yielding typically several elementary schools spanning seven or
nine school years and a single county high school (DeYoung,
1991a; DeYoung, 1994). As dropout rates decrease, more and more
students continue persist in high schools that previously had
allowed seventeen and eighteen year olds to leave. Overcrowding
in many such places, coupled with growing national calls for
going to "the middle school concept" lead many districts to
construct district middle schools. This is typically done by
taking one or two grade levels from both the high school and
district elementary schools. Continuing the domino effect, this
then leads to consolidating elementary schools due to even
smaller elementary school enrollments, as removal of an entire
grade level (or two) makes former elementary schools too small to
receive state school building subsidies.

The Common Core of Data covering the school years 1987/88
through 1991/92 clearly suggests the power of "the middle school
concept" to "solve" low enrollment problems in a nation
uncommitted to shoring-up small communities via public education.
This dataset, developed by the National Center for Education
Statistics (1993), contains directory-style information on every

public school in the nation. It is particularly useful to us
because among its variables are ones that specify each school's
low and high grades, enrollment, and for the past five years,
each school's "type of locale," which is a geographic location
variable.

Insert Figure P about here

We first asked the National Data Resource Center (NDRC) to
provide us with a rough nationwide indication of the absolute and
proportional changes in the number of middle-level schools during
the applicable period (1987/88-1991-92) by type of locale. We
defined middle-level schools as those with low grades greater
than 4 and high grades less than 10. On this basis a variety of
configurations count as middle schools.

Crosstabulations provided by NDRC indicated that in rural
areas (as defined by the appropriate NCES type of locale code),
middle-level schools (as we defined them) increased nationwide as
a proportion of all schools over this five year period. Table N1
presents the relevant data.

Insert Table N1 about here

Two observations seem most important with respect to the
data in Table N1. First, in rural areas nationwide, the
percentage increase in the proportion of schools that are middle-

level schools is 19.7 percent (based on the increase from 10.09
to 12.08 percent). This contrasts to the national trend where
there was virtually no increase in the percentage of middle
schools, and to the trend in urban areas, where the proportion of
all schools that were middle-level schools actually declined by
5.9 percent (based on the decrease from 13.95 to 13.12 percent).
It is importuit to recall that the CCD represents the actual
universe of all schools and is not a sample.

We next performed two further analyses to provide greater
detail. First, we repeated the national analysis for the four-
state region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia)
served by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL).
Appalachian states--together with states like Vermont and New
Hampshire--are among the most rurally populated areas of the
nation. That is, while population density is low in comparison
to urban locations, population dispersion is more uniform than is
the case elsewhere (e.g. in western states like Colorado and
Arizona). In short, ruralness does not mean vast spaces empty of
population in states iike West Virginia and Vermont.

The results of this analysis (see Table N2) accord well with
the apparent national trends. Here again, there are notable
increases in the numbers and proportions of middle-level schools
in rural areas, with decreases evident elsewhere.

Insert table N2 about here

In a subsidiary analysis, we examined the effect of the
creation of specialized middle-level schools on the existence of
schools with other types of grade level configurations. Two
likely possible effects of creating more middle level schools are
(1) the concomitant decline of traditional K-8 elementary schools
and (2) the contingent creation of more K-6 "residual" elementary
schools.

To assess this possible effect, we created a more complex
typology of eight school configurations including three types of
focal interest: full elementary; primary or K-6 elementary; and a
revised middle-level configuration (high grades 7 to 9 and low
grade 4 or higher). We crosstabulated the numbers and
proportions (of all schools) for each of these configurations in
rural areas for the years 1987/88 versus 1991/92. We also
assessed the enrollments for each type during these years. Table
N3 presents the results.

Insert table N3 about here

The data in Table N3 tend to support the conventional
wisdom, but also reveal another interesting trend. First, we
observe that, as predicted, the number and proportion of full-
elementary configuration types declined in rural areas of the AEL
region, whereas both the number and proportion of K-6 residual
elementary configuration schools increased in tandem with an
increased number and proportion of the middle school

configuration type.   Second, we note that the average enrollment
in all three configuration types increased over the five year
period.

Specifically, in the rural areas of the AEL region, the
proportion of all schools in the full-elementary configuration
type declined precipitously, both in absolute numbers and in
proportion to all schools: a 27 percent decline in absolute
numbers and a 24 percent decline on the basis of proportion in
just five years. At the same time, however, the proportion of
schools of the residual elementary type and the middle-level type
increased by 12.6 and 11.3 p̅cent, respectively. Average
enrollments in the three configuration types (full elementary,
residual elementary, and middle-level) increased by 3.8, 3.8, and
10 percent, respectively. From 1987 to 1991 student enrollment
in rural areas of this four-state region declined 1.8 percent
(from 750,799 to 737,133); the rural type of locale was the only
locale to exhibit a decrease in this time-span.

These data document what is happening, and what our
experiences in rural schools suggest: The creation of middle
schools provides an opportunity for more widespread
consolidation. New middle schools gather students in larger
units, but their construction also provides the opportunity to
close other schools--most likely the smaller K-8 types that will
not be considered viable once their upper-grade students have
departed. These residual schools produce residual students to be
merged with students at more viable residual elementary schools.

The empirical data clearly suggests that promoting the "middle school philosophy" is consistent with, and that it facilitates, continued attempts to consolidate rural schooling, at least in the five-year period for which national and regional data are available. What we observe in rural areas may be the final step in constructing a "modernist" system that sorts children into larger units of increasingly narrow age groupings in the name of efficiency. Interestingly, even in the mid-size cities of the AEL region, both the number and proportion of middle-level schools declined from 1987/88 to 1991/92 (by 7.8 and 5.4 percent, respectively).

What's Really at Issue?

Professional arguments in favor of moving to middle schools in rural places--because this was the trend in metropolitan areas--is misguided. The urban problems of system-wide overcrowding and desegregation dynamics, which are admittedly behind the national movement, do not characterize rural America's social or economic realities very well. Here, the transportation, economic, and demographic forces of the national culture have for decades been eroding and eliminating rural towns, villages, and farms. Geographic and social communities disappear in rural America. Urban and suburban places confront challenges that differ from those that confront rural places, and they embody different commitments (Stern, 1994). Certainly the very existence of geographic entities is not at stake in the same

way in urban and suburban areas (CDF, 1992; Hobbs, 1992).

Many professional educators also fail to recognize that
schools have social functions in addition to instructional ones.
Particularly in rural places, these other functions often assume
greater importance with school participants (particularly
students and parents) than the instructional ones (Waller, 1932;
Coleman, 1961). Teachers and school administrators, imbued by
their training with an understanding of young people from
developmental perspectives, typically believe (for instance) that
high school sports are merely a physical release for students.
Students, parents and alumni themselves, however, often believe
such activities are a primary source of community identity and
commitment. David Tyack traces the evolution of such sentiments
in rural places well:

> During the nineteenth century the country
> school belonged to the community in more than
> a legal sense: it was frequently the focus
> for people's lives outside the home.....In
> one-room schools all over the nation
> ministers met their flocks, politicians
> caucused with the faithful, families gathered
> for Christmas parties and hoe-downs, the
> Grange held its baked-bean suppers, Lyceum
> lecturers spoke, itinerants introduced the
> wonders of the lantern-slide and the crank-up
> phonograph, and neighbors gathered to hear
> spelling bees and declamations....As one of
> the few social institutions which rural
> people encountered daily, the common school
> both reflected and shaped a sense of
> community.
>
> (1974, pp. 15-17)

In urban places, of course, public schools rarely enjoyed
such popularity because they were among many social institutions

developing simultaneously. There, community social life occurred in a myriad of non-school settings from the playhouse to the movie theater to the roller rink and to the YMCA. Schools there were likely viewed as less socially multidimensional, while rural schools were the main venue for all forms of social life until most recently (Peshkin, 1978, 1982). Because parents and community members consider curricular improvements (e.g., implementing the middle-school philosophy) as just one dimension of schooling, hardly its sole or even its most important objective, most consolidation efforts lead by the profession and by state and local education agencies usually gets a hostile reception from citizens.

Citizens, however, typically act under the sway of an understandable illusion. In consolidation battles, they believe that they live in a democracy and that their voices in such matters are entitled to be heard and heeded. They do not realize that both case law and legislation clearly declares school districts as entities in which citizens have few vested rights. States have the clear authority to create and abolish districts, as districts have the clear authority to create and abolish schools--with minimal input from the public (Howley, 1993). This explains why citizens often feel that local hearings on school closure are perfunctory exercises: Often, they are. because no more is required by law than to hold such a hearing. Consideration or disregard of input provided is almost always within the discretion of the relevant authority.

We submit that belief in the practical utility of middle schooling in many rural places will further erode rural communities, which continue to identify their local schools as symbolic and central to the very existence of their social life (DeYoung, 1994). To the extent which Americans in rural locales continue to value a sense of place and a sense of the particular communities in such places, they need to resist the philosophy of "the middle school concept" when professional educators begin to talk about "school improvement." Otherwise they may improve their own school right out of existence.

Educational Trends in Opposition to the Logic of Middle Schooling

The idea of the middle school is founded on the assumption that the individual is the focus of pedagogy, and that theories of personal and psychological development ought to inform and dictate institutional practice. If the psychological "needs" of the learner is the focal point, then the "needs" of communities logically come second. But educational reform attending to such psychological needs is not the only initiative that one might choose. As Kliebard would no doubt concur, each of the other three ideological views on the nature and purpose of schooling have agendas which may or may not coexist with the developmental logic of middle schooling.

One emergent school reform agenda which could undercut the "inevitability" of consolidation and segmentation of the school population by age is the concerted effort to restore or build

school communities as caring places (Brown, 1991; Noddings, 1988; Sizer, 1984). In our view, such efforts would fall within the social meliorist arena in Kliebard's scheme--but at least some of the positions in most of the ideologies of American schooling can easily accommodate features of this perspective. Mainstream researchers and theorists have already begun to approve the idea that such reconstruction stands the best chance of success in small schools (Sergiovanni, 1993).

In any event, underlying this restructuring agenda is the conviction that schools themselves should constitute communities that require active parent and community participation. But this quality of participation is extraordinarily difficult to achieve in consolidated rural schools, as children and parents must travel ever longer distances to be a part of the life of a school so far removed from their homes. Even a trip of half an hour imposes a daunting barrier: And in many places, schools are much more distant. In particular, it is claimed, low-income parents and the parents of "at-risk" children need to become part of the school-community nexus for systematic enhancement of learner success.

In light of such arguments, the value of keeping rural schools of almost any size and configuration open is substantial. The vision of schools as caring communities stands in opposition to any policy which views community (especially the external community) as secondary to instructional ends informed by alleged "advances" in understanding the developmental needs of children.

A somewhat different (and perhaps more social efficiency
inspired) school reform effort is the current "one-stop" human
service center concept growing in popularity in various states.
In Kentucky, the recent state reform act has authorized and
funded family and youth service centers currently being organized
at all school sites with significant numbers of children and
families living below the U.S. poverty level. Here, parents and·
children are encouraged to bring health, nutritional, and
educational problems to the attention of service providers who
are not primarily classroom educators. One criterion of success
in this state will be the extent to which targeted families and
children take advantage of services provided. In such an
undertaking, decentralizing and dispersing the centers throughout
the region--by organizing them at school sites--is hypothesized
to reach more children and families than would be case if
services and or service referrals were centralized.
Decentralizing health and social services while simultaneously
centralizing educational services in rural places would appear
contradictory. We believe that it is.

Middle Schooling and the Communitarian Critique of Liberal Theory

As we have attempted to demonstrate, the policy implications
for pursuing the "middle school concept" in rural America is
misguided and potentially harmful, particularly for those of us
who value small communities. Institutional forms borrowed from
metropolitan areas can be problematic at best. And trusting

professional educators whose profession has historically been
built upon individualistic sciences rather than communitarian
ones probably serves interests more generic than those inherent
in the diverse rural places of America.

But this essay is not really an attack on developmentalists
or educators per se; all three of us are educators, and we
certainly appreciate the reality of human growth. Moreover, this
essay is only partly about middle" schools and related debates
about the nature and "needs" of preadolescence. Rather, implicit
in much of what we have traced here is a small part of a greater
cultural debate between traditional liberal democrats and
nontraditional communitarians within Western culture.

A basic conflict within Western social theory since at least
the eighteenth century has been between those who emphasize the
rights of individuals and those who stress "the common good."
Champions of inalienable individual rights--including the right
to an education tailored to one's own individual need--remain at
odds with those who argue that the general welfare of
collectivities (communities, societies, nations) must take
precedence over individual rights (Theobald and Newman, 1994).
And we note that which collectivity one values, particularly its
level of aggregation or scale, differentiates commitments among
those who might all refer to themselves as upholders of the
communitarian tradition (Lasch, 1991).

The recognition of this general cultural conflict is
certainly well known to educators as we look outwards from the

school at national debates over who has the right to bear arms,
or whether the nation ought to restrict development of wetlands
or beachfront property. At this level, we all know there is a
debate and there are issues. And, according to sociologists like
Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985, 1991), the erosion of
community under the assault of individual rights this century is
having severe consequences upon how we as a people respond to
collective political and cultural issues in the nation. They
suggest that there may be important limits to personal autonomy
and individual rights which require renewed focus if American
communities (and also the individuals that constitute them) are
to persist. We think that any school reform initiative that
might further erode community involvement and participation in
the lives of schools would be a mistake: a mistake which
reformers like Goodlad (1984, 1994) and Sizer (1984, 1992) are
taking pains to reverse.

Middle schools in rural places that come at the expense of
closing any rural elementary (or high) school that would not be
consolidated otherwise exacts an unacceptably high cost in the
quality of community life, in our experience. There are <u>already
far too few schools</u> in this country, assuming that we really have
decided that we want the community and parents involved. We need
to eschew school reform proposals in the countryside which
disregard the well-being of rural communities so that the alleged
rights of children to a "developmentally appropriate" education
come before the common good. The critique of "middle schooling"

as a strategy for school improvement lies at the theoretical

level, which we have taken some pains to document. We hope in a

provocative fashion.

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Figure P

NCES Type of Locale Codes

Type of Locale Code	Definition
Large City	Central city of an SMSA, with the city having a population greater than or equal to 400,000 or a population density greater than or equal to 6,000 people per square mile.
Mid-Size City	Central city of an SMSA, with the city having a population less than 400,000 and a population density less than 6,000 people per square mile.
Fringe of Large City	Place within an SMSA of a Large Central City and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.
Fringe of Mid-Size City	Place within an SMSA of a Mid-Size Central City and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.
Large Town	Town not within an SMSA, with a population greater than or equal to 25,000.
Small Town	Town not within an SMSA and with a population less than 25,000 and greater than or equal to 2,500 people.
Rural	A place with fewer than 2,500 people or a place having a ZIP code designated rural by the Census Bureau.

Source: Johnson, F. (1988, March). Assigning Type of Locale Codes to the 1987-1988 CCD Public School Universe. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 312 113)

Table N1

Changes Nationwide in Number and Proportion of Middle-Level Schools

	Type of Locale Code						
	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1987/88							
number of schools	2297	3366	312	1371	1775	1857	1045
as proportion of all schools (%)	10.09	17.01	16.07	16.80	15.76	15.56	13.95
1991/92							
number of schools	2710	3336	351	1365	1933	1884	1059
as proportion of all schools	12.08	17.58	15.18	16.40	15.74	15.32	13.12

Key (type of locale)   7 = rural; 6 = small town; 5 = large town;
                        4 = fringe (mid-size city); 3 = fringe (large city)
                        2 = mid-size city; 1 = large city

Table N2

Changes in Number and Proportion of Middle-Level Schools (AEL Region)
by Type of Locale

Type of Locale Code

	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1987/88 number of schools	193	225	*	109	*	166	*
as proportion of all schools (%)	18.5	18.1	*	18.2	*	18.6	*
1991/92 number of schools	219	231	*	110	*	153	*
as proportion of all schools	21.0	18.5	*	18.0	*	17.6	*

Key (type of locale)   7 = rural; 6 = small town; 5 = large town;
                       4 = fringe (mid-size city); 3 = fringe (large city)
                       2 = mid-size city; 1 = large city

Note: Data omitted for types of locale with fewer than 50 schools. (See
       Johnson, 1988, for discussion of how the prevalence of types of locale
       varies substantially according to state.)

Table N3

Rural Schools, Number and Proportion, by Configuration Type (AEL Region)
with Average Enrollment

1987/88

Configuration Type:	Full Elementary	Residual Elementary	Middle-Level
Number	555	810	212
Proportion (%)	27.7	40.4	10.6
Average Enrollment	341.4	297.7	386.5

1991/92

Number	404	874	227
Proportion (%)	21.0	45.5	11.8
Average Enrollment	354.3	309.2	425.2