

The introduction of middle schools in the Northern Territory; processes and reality.

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Abstract

The year 2006 has been a year in which a decision on the introduction of middle schools has been made by the Labor government of the Northern Territory. The initial impetus for the change came from the 2003 Secondary Education Review *Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory*, chaired by Gregor Ramsay. There are many features of this change which will include both administrative and pedagogical aspects. Some comparisons with other systems which include a middle schooling element will be made. However the way in which educational change in the Territory is being introduced is of importance in itself and much of this study will relate to the change mechanisms that the government has used and public reaction to them.

Introduction

The topic of middle schools is contentious and indeed the simplest of questions "What is a middle school" has no universal answer. This study examines some of the features of middle schools worldwide as seen by both proponents and critics of middle schools systems. The study also details the process of educational change in the Northern Territory to create a middle school system; it shows that the basis for educational change is more political than educational and that much of the apparent debate about the change was a chimera. The study also questions the priority of utilising so many resources on middle schooling, whilst many Aboriginal students of secondary age are not provided with schooling at all.

In different parts of the world the terms 'middle schools' or 'middle schooling' account for groups of children of different age groups. Middle schools can be said to be separate institutions whilst middle schooling represents the years considered as mid-points of schooling whether spent in elementary or secondary education. The differences in the age range of institutions which are called middle schools varies considerably, so research referring to middle schools needs to be examined closely if some comparison is asserted.

For example, in Britain middle schools generally are for children in grades approximately 5-8. Walsh, Stephens & Moore (2000, p. 273) point out that between the ages of 5 and 16 there is a compulsory phase of education, with ages 5-11 being the primary phase and 11-16 being secondary. There are exceptions to this pattern, with some pupils leaving primary school at the age of eight or nine and attending middle schools between the age of 8 or 9 and 12 or 13, before proceeding to secondary school (Walsh, Stephens & Moore, 2000). The online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia (URL: Wikipedia_UK) states that there are middle schools for ages 9 to 13, similar to the American system.

Australian practice can vary between states/ territories or even within states/ territories. For example, currently the Northern Territory has Year 7 being the first year of secondary education in the Alice Springs area whereas it has Year 8 being the first year of secondary education in the Darwin area. In South Australia, there is great interest in the 'middle years' according to a government website

The 'middle years' refers to Years 6 to 9, and every two years Adelaide invites teachers to come together to hear about recent research and developments in 'middle years' schooling. (URL: Middle years, SA)

Bryer and Main (2005) turn a critical eye on the issues of middle school reform in Queensland. They state that:

Middle school reforms in Queensland need to bring about practices that are achievable by teachers in balance with practices that are academically and socially motivating to students and their parents. (Bryer and Main, 2005, p. 138)

Western Australia is opening middle schools. For example:

A new secondary school will be built in Western Australia. The school will be built at Secret Harbour, south of Rockingham. The region is a rapidly growing area in need of increased services. The school will be a middle school, catering to students from Year 8 to Year 10. (Anon, 2003)

A similar pattern is found in the USA, where again there is little consistency in the age range for middle schools (see Appendix 1) In an example from Spartanburg, South Carolina, a junior school has recently (2006) split from being a junior school to being a junior and a middle school. The junior school moved to a new building. The extract shows that this middle school has grade 6, grade 7 and grade 8.

Now that a new high school has been built on Highway 176, the seventh- and eighth-grade teachers can expand on the old campus, and for the first time they have welcomed sixth-grade students from O.P. Earle Elementary. (Stevens, 2006).

It is possible to choose many examples from the available literature, but the example above shows that some jurisdictions are still continuing to build middle schools and invest heavily in separate buildings. Some educational researchers believe that middle schools are the way forward in education, whereas other researchers consider that middle schools, which have a forty year history in some parts of the USA, have failed. This depends on the definition as Beane (2001) dates middle schooling back to 1909. The point to make is that there is such a variety of practice in institutions called middle schools that it is difficult to compare like with like.

It is interesting to observe that those involved in one significant international survey, when choosing grades in the middle school to test mathematics and science knowledge, chose just grades 7 & 8.

The results provided in this report describe students' science achievement at both the seventh and eighth grades. For most, but not all TIMSS countries, the two grades tested at the middle-school level represented the seventh and eighth years of formal schooling. (TIMSS, 1996, p. 11)

Arguments for and Against Middle Schools

The vast majority of the literature involves philosophies, pedagogies, and goals for middle schools or, more generally, for the middle years of schooling. An article by Dowson, Ross, Donovan, Richards and Johnson (2005) gives a summary of recent research on the middle years of schooling in an Australian context. There is a huge volume of research about the teaching of curriculum areas (mathematics, music, social science and science and most other curriculum areas); there is also research about how teachers should be educated to use these methods in middle schools. These academic philosophies may well be part of the background to a change to a separate middle school system, but in the end the changes take place due primarily to political or economic pressures. It is this side of the equation that the paper will describe with some emphasis on examples from the author's own experience, but with the main aim of explaining how a system of middle schools will be introduced in the Northern Territory.

Middle Schools in the London Borough of Merton

In 1969 the London Borough of Merton changed to a middle school system. Prior to 1969 the system consisted of primary schools with a tripartite secondary

education system (grammar, technical and secondary modern schools). The author had worked in Nigeria and returned to England to a teaching post at a grammar school in Merton (Palmer, 1993). At this time the government in Britain was a Labor one and the tripartite system of education was in the process of change to a comprehensive one. The London Borough of Merton was under Conservative control, but it was not ideologically confident enough to resist Central Government's pressure to go comprehensive. The London Borough of Sutton (a neighbouring borough) was more confident and confrontational; it never went comprehensive; it merely changed the names of the schools.

There were persuasive arguments in Merton that the system might even be cheaper to run if the new comprehensive system could be organised without any new buildings being required. This outcome was cleverly achieved by utilising existing schools in a three tier system (primary, middle and secondary) rather than just primary and secondary schools as was the case in the old system. The change was administered skillfully in the London Borough of Merton whose chief education officer was Ron Greenwood. He is credited with avoiding many of the problems that other local education authorities encountered and with having minimal building costs as a result of the change. He also ensured that staff in the schools were consulted and given some choice about their future teaching career.

Nonetheless, due to the geography and social demography of the borough, the main government aims of full comprehensivisation were probably also neatly sidestepped. Merton stretches from some of the poorer streets of Streatham to the wider leafier avenues of Wimbledon and Morden. Its division into area comprehensives meant that each comprehensive tended to reflect the area around it in terms of the aspirations of the children attending them (and of their parents). The varying socio-economic status of different parts of Merton led to the schooling at the different comprehensives being of very different quality. It also kept the former grammar schools at the wealthier part of the borough largely unscathed. Although Merton's change to a comprehensive system might not have been entirely a matter of genuine commitment, and although the change to a large extent favoured the larger traditional grammar schools changing them very slowly, one innovation did come out of this change - the creation of a new type of school called the middle school.

In 2002 there was a further major change to Merton's schools.

In September 2002, Merton changed from its old system of first, middle and high schools to a two tier system of primary and secondary schools, with children changing school only once at age 11. (Wolchover, 2003, p. 393)

This is very surprising and brings out a central problem in the discipline of comparative education. It is a fact that in two different educational systems,

one (Merton) has reverted to a system it changed more than thirty years ago, whereas the other (NT) is about to embrace that system. Should the comparativist rush to judgement, stating that one or other of these changes is wrong? Those interested in comparative education will not react impulsively, but rather study the different social and political conditions that have led to the change.

Why did Merton give up its middle schools? One part of the answer lies in the explanation below.

Pupil performance in Merton's secondary schools is rapidly improving. Examination success is an important measure of how our secondary schools are serving Merton's young people. The reorganisation of the education system in Merton means that our secondary schools now take responsibility for all of key stage 3 (pupils from 11-14 years of age) as well as key stage 4 (14-16 years of age). This is already having a significant effect on overall results in both key stages. In 2003 the percentage of pupils gaining five or more A*-C passes increased by 4.5%. The average increase across the whole country was just 1%. At key stage 3 the percentage of pupils achieving level 5+ increased in English, maths and science. The improvement in maths was around 5% on the previous year's results. Forecasts for performance in future years suggest that performance in national tests and examinations will continue to improve in Merton. (URL: Merton High Schools)

In both the UK and the USA, there is dissatisfaction with the way middle schools are performing where there are middle schools, but where they do not exist the middle years of schooling are blamed.

Middle Schools in the United States

In the USA, one example of a system under pressure is Montgomery, Alabama.

"We know that [middle schools] aren't performing at a level that they need to be, so some interventions have been put into place," said Linda Ferrell, director of middle school instruction for the system. "Believe me, community superintendents and our offices have been working with our schools and saying, 'We have targets to meet.' But we acknowledge there is a gap and that we can all benefit from improvement. " (Aratani, 2006)

There are many critics of the middle school system in the USA; one of the more strident is Cheri Pierson Yecke (2003) who wrote *The war on excellence: The rising tide of mediocrity in America's middle schools*. Yecke claims in her latest book, *Mayhem in the Middle: How Middle Schools Have Failed America--and How to Make Them Work*, (evidently not yet available) that middle schools with

grades 5-8 or 6-8 have become academic backwaters (Anon, 2006a). Yecke (Yecke, 2006) summarises her views in a recent article:

Middle schools are increasingly switching to the k-8 model to improve student achievement. Ten strategies can help ease the transition. Yecke (2006)

Her article lists these strategies with a major emphasis on achievement in mathematics as a key to higher standards generally. In her latest book, Yecke calls for establishing higher academic standards, shifting toward K-8 schools, and expanding the availability of advanced courses for students in grades 6 to 8 (Anon, 2006a).

The reverse side of the coin is put by Watson (1999). Watson credits middle schools with being amongst the first to experiment with block structures, interdisciplinary teams, thematic instruction, varied forms of governance and many other innovative and creative programs and states that:

Since the early 1960s, middle level schools have been consistently and continually working to improve the ways that the pre- and early adolescent child is taught. (Watson, 1999, p. v -vi)

Put simply the critics lambaste middle schools for failing to give students a satisfactory academic base, whilst defenders of middle schools point to their success in the improved socialisation of the students they teach.

The irony in the case of the Northern Territory is that the Minister proposes middle schools on the grounds that the creation of middle schools will increase academic standards, whereas in other parts of the world middle school systems are being overturned on the grounds that they have reduced academic standards. This incongruity will be examined later in greater detail. The research evidence for creating or retaining middle schools or for abolishing them is complicated by the existence of so many different middle school systems with the result that the research tends to echo the ideological preferences of the researchers. A very carefully researched background paper (Cobbald, 2006) that attempted to weigh the evidence fairly within an Australian context was prepared for the Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations (COGSO) and reaches the conclusion that the research evidence for a change to middle schools is unconvincing.

Middle Schools in the Northern Territory: A History

Strangely the system of middle schools suggested for the Northern Territory (NT) is very like the senior and junior secondary schools of the 1990s system in the NT and a system similar to Nigeria which has a 6:3:3:4 system (URL: Secondary education in Nigeria). One reason why Nigeria decided on the

6:3:3:4 system was that students spent a shorter time in senior secondary school and the system thus cost the government less to provide. Costs per student in Years 11 & 12 are higher than in years 7-10. Junior secondary school in Nigeria covers grades 7, 8 & 9, precisely the same grades proposed for middle schools in the Northern Territory. Could a hidden reason for the decision to change be lower costs?

Prior to the Cameron (1992) review, junior high schools in the top end of the Northern Territory consisted of Grades 8, 9 & 10. The Cameron report did focus on Grades 11 & 12, but its recommendations were ignored and the politicians added Years 11 & 12 to most junior high schools. This was popular with the electorate as generally families had a school teaching Y11 and Y12 closer to them; also ambitious teachers had a greater opportunity to teach advanced work. However there was no public consultation. It could be said that the government at that time, the Country Liberal Party (CLP), moved further away from a middle school model. The system has not suffered any major changes since that time, but rather slow and systematic improvements; the major change in curriculum in years K-10 has been the introduction of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) to cover Years K to 10. An influential report regarding indigenous primary education was *Learning lessons. An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory* by Collins & Lea (1999); its recommendations are being implemented.

The NT Labor government had education as a major platform in its election on 18 August, 2001 (re-elected 18 June, 2005). It decided that the first step in educational change should be a review of secondary education since secondary education had not been examined independently for a decade. The 2003 Secondary Education Review *Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory*, chaired by Gregor Ramsay, provided an impetus for major change. There was widespread criticism of the report (for example, COGSO, 2004), but the government carefully picked out those parts of the report for implementation, following community consultation which indicated those policies which might be risky in electoral terms. (Palmer, 2005)

Future Directions and Middle Schools

The 2003 Secondary Education Review *Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory* did recommend the establishment of middle schools as one of its major recommendations and this was one of the controversial sections of the report.

The review acknowledged the widespread diversity of what are called 'middle schools'.

There is no consistency across or within many of the states and systems in the years that constitute the middle years of schooling. While the

broadest definition of the term middle years generally includes Years 5-10, middle school programs vary across Australia. Some middle schools start at Year 5, while others begin at Year 6 or 7. Similarly, there is a range of exit points with middle school programs finishing variously at Years 8, 9 and 10. (Ramsay, 2004, p. 93, no 23)

The committee also saw the establishment of learning precincts as being an essential part of its plans to establish middle schools, but the government saw these as being both expensive and unpopular so the recommendations on learning precincts are not being implemented.

Learning Precincts will make many of the problems of delivery easier to solve, such as transitions from primary to secondary, from later middle to senior years, from school to work or further study or community participation. (Ramsay, 2004, executive summary, p. 10)

The recommendations of the report, even in the executive summary are quite lengthy, but government has tried to implement them, though careful reading shows that they are currently only being implemented in part.

To achieve better outcomes for all young people, the review proposes ways to deal with the wide span of learning required in secondary school, and the very different pedagogies (teaching and learning practices) needed to appeal to younger secondary-aged students, as compared with those required for young people approaching adulthood. It has set out two clear stages of secondary schooling, the 'later middle years' (Years 7-9) and the 'senior years' (Years 10-12). The introduction of these two stages needs to be accompanied by changes to curriculum and pedagogy for each of them, and also changes to the current organisational and physical structures of schools. The movement of Year 7 students to high school will be required in those parts of the Territory where this is not already the case, as will the movement of Year 10s to senior colleges or the senior part of the secondary school. To allow sufficient planning and preparation time, it is proposed that these moves occur in 2006. In the meantime, to assist teachers to meet the diverse learning needs of students in the new stages of schooling, it will be essential for DEET to develop a Teaching and Learning Framework that teachers can use to build their repertoires of pedagogies, and for an accompanying professional development program to be designed and implemented. Support will also be needed to enable professional learning communities to be established, in which teachers will have the opportunity to develop, share, trial and test these pedagogies; and opportunities should be provided for teachers to use action research to explore innovative teaching and learning models. (Ramsay, 2004, executive summary, p. xv)

Firstly the time-frame was initially postponed from 2006 to 2007. The well-intentioned changes in curriculum and pedagogy are unlikely to happen as the committee envisaged. There will be a number of physical changes required to schools and some of these are already underway, but it would appear that changes will cause some parts of the school system to be overcrowded whilst others will be underutilised. The plan for implementation is already underway and is now described as a three year plan to implement middle schools (Stirling, 2006).

The Middle Years approach is the most significant education reform in many years. It will drive better results. It is the best investment in our children's futures. (Stirling, 2006, p. 24)

The way in which the government has gone about making changes is similar to the methods used to make changes after the secondary review, but it has learnt from the earlier experience and has streamlined the process.

The Political Process of Educational Change

The NT government has legitimate concerns about the student results at the Year 12 level in the Northern Territory. The Minister of Education, Syd Stirling, has pointed out on a number of occasions that NT Year 12 results are worse than those of South Australia on whose Year 12 examinations the NT examinations are modelled and that South Australian results are the second worst among Australian jurisdictions (Gumbleton, 2006a). Gumbleton (2006b) quotes Professor Alan Reid as saying that Territory and South Australian retention rates past Year 10 are worse than those of other states. Professor Reid believes students in the middle years have to be enthused, engaged and encouraged to continue learning. Perhaps more influential in the drive for change were the complaints of Defence and industry groups who met with the Chief Minister, Clare Martin to complain about the secondary education system in the Territory (Anon, 2006b). The consultancy firm, Socom, had been hired to carry out community consultations for the NT government with respect to the Secondary Education Review. Socom's final report to government in June 2004 showed that 90% of respondents were in favour of a new approach to middle years education. Socom were again contracted to carry out community consultations about middle schools and an initial report in September 2005 showed that 99% of respondents supported middle schools being defined as 11 to 14 year olds (Anon, 2006b). It is not known what alternatives to middle schools respondents were offered, but the government then knew that, though expensive, the implementation of a separate middle schools system would not meet determined public resistance. Careful reviews of middle schooling, such as the review provided by COGSO (Cobbold, 2006) do not suggest that separate middle schools are necessarily dysfunctional; rather they suggest that additional resources put into teacher education and appropriate curricula

would be a more effective use of funds. Put in another way, the \$42 million to be spent mainly on school buildings will be wasted if teachers are not in-serviced about their new role and if the curriculum remains the same.

The process of selling the project to the public has been similar to the process used for publicising the Secondary Education Review. However because the Secondary Education Review covered many more separate issues, it took a long while to explain to the public; on the other hand the public consultation of the middle schools issue as mirrored by the local press was short and sharp, taking less than a month for the publication of letters and text messages about middle schools. The government is also producing a number of advertising features in the local press to keep the public onside.

The Role of the 'Press'

Between 11 March, 2006 and 11 April, 2006 there were 74 letters and text messages in the *Northern Territory News* that could be classified as being about middle schools and expressing an opinion in favour of middle schools or against them. Of the 74 letters and text messages, 58 (78%) could be classified as being against middle schools. However the single most discussed topic was whether the only senior college in Darwin (Casuarina Senior College), which currently takes just years 11 and 12 should, as was indicated in all plans, take in Years 10, 11, and 12. Teachers and students at Casuarina Senior College (CSC) strongly opposed Year 10 coming to Casuarina. The *Northern Territory News* claimed it was inundated with text messages from students who opposed Casuarina accepting Year 10 students (McLean, 2006).

There were also a number of public consultations. Those who attended were asked to choose between four possible plans (Be part of it advertisement, 2006). These four plans were (i) The combination model (ii) The comprehensive model (iii) The separate schools model (iv) The Ludmilla model. The plans involve different schools in different age combinations as indicated in Table 1.

Of these, perhaps only the Ludmilla plan needs further explanation. One problem with the whole scheme is that student numbers in each of the schools in the grades as they exist in 2006 do not favour re-arrangement (taken literally) in any of the options discussed. The Ludmilla plan suggests having the spacious and fairly central primary school (Ludmilla Primary) which services a high proportion of a local Aboriginal community (Bagot) turned into a middle school. The plan makes some logistical and economic sense, but would be a betrayal of the social justice issues that are said to be a part of the Labor Government's values. A small number of respondents to the *Northern Territory News* stated their opposition to the Ludmilla model.

TABLE 1: DARWIN AND NORTHERN SUBURBS*

Schools	Combination Model	Separate Schools Model	Comprehensive Model	Ludmilla Model
Casuarina S C	10-12	10-12	10-12	10-12
Darwin HS	7-9 10-12	10-12	7-9 10-12	10-12
Dripstone HS	10-12	7-9	7-9	7-9
Nightcliff HS	7-9	7-9	7-9	7-9
Sanderson HS	7-9	7-9	7-9	7-9
Ludmilla	Not included	Not included	Not included	7-9

* Taken from 'Be part of it' advertisement, 2006.

For the two existing high schools in Palmerston and the rural areas, there was virtually no choice. Both high schools would remain comprehensive schools each consisting of a sub school as a 7-9 middle school and a sub school as a 10-12 senior school.

Between 12 April, 2006 and 6 June there were a further 7 letters and text messages, but the sting had gone out of the debate. On 7 June 2006 Mr Stirling announced the government's decision, which was to follow the comprehensive model. It was decided that implementation will be delayed for a year; a new middle school will be built on Darwin high school land; and extra classrooms will be provided for Casuarina Senior College. Year 7 of all primary schools will go into middle schools. This gives primary schools extra space but the consequence may be that some overcrowding might be anticipated in some middle schools. Only two letters have been noted about middle schools after this. On the major issue of Casuarina College which caused most friction, the government did not back down. Staff and students will have to get used to the college being for Years 10, 11 & 12.

If the main area of debate on whether Year 10 students should attend Casuarina and the few letters about the future of Ludmilla are excluded, then there are only 11 letters that discuss the wider issues of middle schools. Generally these letters were thoughtful comparisons of the NT situation with other states. One letter (Fowler, 2006), by a former educational researcher in the Department of Education, proffered the old adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". Fowler suggested additional funds would be better spent improving the student/teacher ratio. Counter to that there is the view, based on what is popularly known as the 'Hawthorne effect' (Gale, 2004), that frequent change can improve productivity.

Government has modified the details of its approach to counter some opposition, but the change will prove costly in terms of buildings. Ruling out the Ludmilla option meant additional building. There seems to be a general acceptance of the change by the community and a determination to make the

plan work. The political process has been well handled and it is unlikely that the Government will lose office on the grounds that it has failed education. On the other hand, the use of sub schools in Palmerston and the rural area show that middle schools do not have to be separate. The press has certainly allowed the public to feel consulted over this issue. Government has repaid the press by paying for a lot of advertising (full page advertisements) on the details and success of the scheme. The converse is that many of the real issues stay buried.

The Real Issues

The COGSO report (Cobbold, 2006) is as close as can be to a document without apparent bias. It advised government that, on balance, changing to a middle school system was not the best use of resources. The result of the consultation is that, to prevent public disquiet over using Ludmilla Primary as a middle school, a brand new school will be built. The cost of change to a middle school increased, but the Labor government will have shown a determination to improve the education system and to tackle academic concerns of falling standards as its public face. Cobbold (2006) claims standards would improve with greater in-servicing of teachers and concentration on pedagogy and curricula at lower cost. Politically it might be imagined that the action that the government has taken will give it kudos with the electorate. There has been a cabinet reshuffle (September, 2006) and Minister Stirling leaves the education portfolio and Minister Henderson will have to put the middle school plans into effect. As of November, Minister Henderson states that the implementation of plans for middle schools in the Territory is on track (Henderson, 2006). Additional to the \$42 million announced initially, \$46.7 million is now being spent on upgrading existing schools and building new schools (Henderson, 2006). Building has started at a number of schools leading to complaints of disturbing Year 12 students during their examinations and of the cutting down of trees to make way for building Darwin Middle School (Gumbleton, 2006c).

The following exchange at a Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters was reported by Hansard and may indicate a cynical undercurrent in public opinion, which is not often openly revealed:

Emily—They have gone ahead with this middle school rubbish—middle school system.

CHAIR—'Rubbish', you first said.

Senator HOGG—That is all right. You have described it as you see it.

CHAIR—Explain what you mean by that.

Emily—They have introduced middle school as being years 7 to 8 and made year 10 into senior students.

Senator HOGG—And you do not think that should happen?

(URL: Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters) (Accessed 8/09/06)

Perhaps the general public does not accept the changes quite as readily as politicians believe.

The study has concentrated on the government schools, but Catholic and independent schools are developing, or already have, their own middle school systems. In general these are separate middle schools within existing secondary schools so that there is a sense of continuity. Marrara Christian College has had its middle school since 1998 (Advertising feature, p. 3). St John's College (Catholic) now takes in students from Grades 7-12 and features a middle school (Advertising feature, p. 3). Amongst Government Schools, Nightcliff High School has been preparing for middle schooling for the past three years (Advertising feature, p. 8) and there has been some controversy as government plans will in fact slow its metamorphosis.

In government, church and independent education there is thus likely to be an increased emphasis on the middle years of schooling, though catered for in a variety of ways and it is difficult to argue that this is wrong. It should improve the life-chances for the children of voters in Darwin and Alice Springs and the surrounding urban areas. However it can be argued that increased expenditure on what are at best marginal administrative changes in the urban areas removes resources within a limited budget from the Aboriginal settlements where not all children receive education to age 16 years.

Conclusion

The change to middle schools in the Northern Territory is being implemented at a reasonable pace, not too fast and not too slow. Earlier, when trying to follow the timetable indicated by the Ramsay report, there had been public and teacher disquiet at the speed of change. Now after deciding to implement changes more slowly over two years, having had a public consultation and an apparently vigorous debate in local media, public opinion is now more accepting of middle schools; the Labor party politicians have in the end handled the educational change to middle schools quite well, which will improve their electoral chances.

The creation of middle schools is probably not the best use of resources, but most of those in the education system now want to see it work successfully and it will be the work of the educational community to ensure that this change is successful. The change probably shifts government's priority in education away from the real needs for improved secondary education in Aboriginal communities.

The author's personal history in different countries makes the change particularly ironic, since in Merton as a young teacher he was part of a change to a middle school system. Now, 35 years on, Merton has gone back to a primary/secondary approach in order to improve standards at almost the same

time as the Northern Territory is introducing middle schools for precisely the same reason. Can both be correct?

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APPENDIX 1

Definitions of **Middle School** on the Web (referring to the USA):

Educational level referring to either grades six, seven and eight, or grades seven, eight and nine, depending on the individual school district. Synonymous with junior high school.

bhpr.hrsa.gov/diversity/definitions.htm

A separately organized and administered school between the elementary and senior high schools. When called a "junior high school," a middle school usually includes grades 7, 8, and 9 (in a 6-3-3 plan) or grades 7 and 8 (in a 6-2-4 plan). In some districts, however, a middle school spans grades 5 to 8 or grades 6 to 8.

nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/glossary/m.asp

A separately organized and administered intermediate school that includes some combination of elementary Grades 4-6 and secondary Grades 7-9.

www.usoe.k12.ut.us/data/glossary.htm

NB The above definitions were obtained through Google (Accessed 24/08/06)

http://www.google.com.au/search?hl=en&lr=&defl=en&q=define:Middle+School&sa=X&oi=glossary_definition&ct=title