Middle Level Education in Rural Communities:
Implications for School Leaders

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Middle level teachers and administrators working in small or rural schools often face unique obstacles in implementing recommended middle level practices. From sharing staff and schedules with other school sites, to inappropriate instructional techniques, to a general lack of understanding of the middle level philosophy, these obstacles can be a source of frustration for school leaders and hinder school improvement initiatives. A better understanding of these issues and the discussion of potential solutions will benefit teachers, administrators, and policy makers in improving middle level education in rural communities. By building on the positive characteristics found in rural and smaller schools, as well as identifying and addressing the obstacles encountered at smaller schools, middle level leaders can create and maintain distinctive and effective programs for their students.

In the United States, the average middle school enrollment is under 500 students, with most rural middle schools much smaller than that (Wiles, 1995). Educational leaders working in smaller districts encounter unique problems and obstacles in their efforts to provide optimum educational services for its community. This is especially true for school leaders working with middle level students. The formality of the middle school design has created problems for rural educators in creating a "true" middle school (Wiles, 1995).

Common middle school components, such as advisory periods, common plan time, and exploratory wheels, are especially difficult to implement in small and rural schools. But, according to Tadlock and Barrett-Roberts (1995) in their National Middle School Association publication addressing middle level education in rural communities, "although faced with constraints and limitations not experienced in larger schools, small rural school have tremendous potential for meeting the needs of young adolescents" (p. 19).

In 1993-1994, the United States had approximately 10 million students in grades 5 through 8, with 6.8 million of these students attending a middle school (NMSA, 2004). The remaining students, over 1.1 million were not served in a middle school setting. Many of these districts are small and scattered among agrarian communities, which emphasize local control of school districts. As a result, a variety of middle level organizational formats exist within these smaller districts. While certain organizational formats are more prevalent than others, such as K-8 with a 9-12 high school or K-6 with a 7-12 secondary program, there is an array of organizational formats serving middle level students across the nation. Table I shows the variety of organizational structures impacting the educational programs serving middle level students.

Table I

School Organizations Impacting Middle Level Education

Elementary	Middle Level		Secondary
K-5			
K-6	5-6	5-8	
K-8	6-7	6-8	
	7-8	7-9	7-12
	Grade Level Centers 5-6-7-8 grades		
K-12			

Advantages of Small, Rural Schools

The variety of organizational structures, the coupling of middle level programs with elementary or secondary programs, and the traditional practices existing in many communities create unique issues for educators as they work to create and maintain middle level programs in smaller school systems. But there is also a flip side of this issue, as smaller schools have a great deal to offer middle level students.

Transition. As students progress from elementary to middle and on to high school, this transition is generally less disruptive and traumatic than what students in larger systems might encounter (Tadlock & LoGuidice, 1994). Transitioning through a smaller district will include only a few, if any, changes in location and building. Routines that accompany the school day, such as lunch and transportation, will remain stable during these years. And very important for middle school students, peer groups will not be disrupted as often occurs in larger districts. Lastly, students will be well known by many of the adults in the building throughout their educational experiences.

Participation in Activities. According to Meyer (1994), students in rural and smaller middle schools have a very high participation rate in extra-curricular activities. Many of the smaller schools will not need to "cut" students from their team rosters, thus providing more students the opportunity to participate on a school team and eliminating this negative aspect of competitive athletics.

School and Community Ties. In smaller communities, community activities and school activities are highly interrelated (Meyer, 1994; Beane, 1999). Civic activities are often held in school buildings. Much of the social activities of the town evolve around school functions. Community members, including clergy, civic leaders, law enforcement officers, emergency personnel, and local businessmen, are well known to the students and staffs of the schools.

Student - Teacher Relationships. Middle school students in smaller school systems are well known by their teachers (Meyer, 1994; Wiles, 1995). Teachers in rural schools will often teach at more than one grade level, and thus will have students for multiple, and often continuous, years. Likewise, many of the students and their families are known by the teachers and staff members prior to entering the middle school years.

Smallness. Size matters. The size of the facility and the size of the student population in smaller middle schools help facilitate a school climate that is often more personal and supportive than students in a larger system might encounter (Tadlock & Barrett Roberts, 1995). According to Meyer (1994), students in small rural middle schools are more likely to be in classrooms with a low student-teacher ratio. It is much more difficult for students who might be experiencing challenges at school to "fall between the cracks" when that student is part of a small population of students, most of whom are well known by each other, as well as the adults in the building.

Administrators and school leaders need to recognize and build off these positive attributes associated with smaller school districts. They are especially important during the middle level years when students are developing attitudes and dispositions about themselves and their schooling. The positive characteristics associated with smaller school systems often have a positive influence on students as they transition from elementary to high school, building a solid foundation for becoming productive adult learners.

Obstacles Encountered at Smaller Schools

But being small also has its drawbacks. The need for a distinct middle level program, uniquely different from both the elementary and secondary programs, is often difficult to accomplish within smaller school districts. The very fact that the school system is small tends to undermine the need for a distinctive "third" program serving the middle level students. But for those smaller school systems that do commit to a middle level program, school leaders will need to identify and address a number of obstacles that may tend to restrict their efforts.

Shared Staff. Middle level programs in smaller school systems will generally share staff members with other grade levels (Meyer, 1994; Tadlock & Barrett-Roberts, 1995). Most commonly this will include the elective teachers such as band, art, physical education, and FACS, but may also include regular classroom teachers. Likewise, the middle level program may share support services staff such as the counselor, librarian, special education personnel, and administrator. Sharing staff with either the elementary or secondary schools could negatively impact the middle level program in a number of ways. First, teachers working with multiple grade levels will need to adapt to the varying educational needs of the students. What works well with high school students may not work at all with middle level students. Second, shared staff will often mean the moving of teachers from one building to another, creating potential instructional and supervisory problems at both sites. Lastly, shared staff will restrict when certain courses can be offered.

Shared Facilities. A problem often identified with implementing the middle school concept at smaller schools is shared facilities (Meyer, 1994; Tadlock & Barrett-Roberts, 1995). Most common, shared facilities will include the cafeteria, gymnasium, music and art rooms, and library; but could also include regular classrooms. Sharing facilities mandates coordination of the use of this space, both on a daily basis and for extracurricular use. Shared facilities will impact the availability of these areas, impacting when certain courses can be offered. A common problem faced by many middle level schools is having the

gym only available at the beginning of the school day, mandating PE and other electives in the morning.

Shared Schedules. Often accompanying shared staff and a shared facility is a shared schedule, i.e. multiple grade levels operating on the same bell schedule (Meyer, 1994; Tadlock & Barrett-Roberts, 1995). This phenomenon restricts the flexible use of time by teachers or teams. A shared schedule inhibits incorporating a homeroom or advisory period into the regular school day for the middle level students. It also creates common passing times for all students, creating potential inappropriate social situations with high school and middle level students.

Limited Professional Development. Due to the limited number of staff members working in the middle level program, it may be difficult to provide professional development opportunities that focus on middle level issues. According to Johnston (1994), rural middle schools face a number of unique difficulties in establishing a comprehensive staff development program.

Teacher Recruitment and Certification. Recruiting and hiring teachers trained and certified to teach middle level is difficult, especially in certain content areas (Lee & Milburn, 1994; Simmons, 2005). This problem is compounded when a school needs instructors who teach in multiple disciplines, as can be found in many smaller middle level schools.

Limited Interdisciplinary Teaming. Creating a common planning time for a group of teachers working with a common group of students is extremely difficult in a small school (Tadlock & LoGuidice, 1994). First, teachers will generally either teach multiple grade levels or multiple subjects during a school day. Due to scheduling issues, these classes must be provided at specific periods during the day. Second, having a small student population does not allow for four or five teachers (grade level team) to be assigned to a common plan period during the school day. For example, if a school has 200 students and 10 teachers, the master schedule is generally not going to have more than two teachers with a plan period at the same time of day.

Understanding of Middle Level Concepts and Programs. In smaller school districts, there has not been a history of providing a distinct program at the middle level (Johnston, 1994; Beane, 1999). Some teachers, trained as elementary or high school teachers, may have limited understanding of middle level concepts, appropriate teaching strategies, or be knowledgeable of the unique characteristics associated with middle level students (Lee & Milburn, 1994). As the community and the educators may not have a good understanding of middle level concepts such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory, and exploratory classes, this could potentially inhibit both the implementation and continuing support for these programs.

Practical Solutions for School Leaders

There are a number of practical solutions to these obstacles. Middle level administrators and district policy makers should consider the following recommendations.

Leadership. It is imperative that the leadership of the school district be knowledgeable about middle level concepts and programs (Lee & Milburn, 1994; Grigsby, Miller, Scully, & Thomas, 2002). School leaders and board members should participate in conferences and review literature regarding middle level education. Site leaders should participate in professional organizations such as state principal associations, either elementary or secondary, and the Missouri Middle School Association.

Staff Development. Teachers and administrators should participate in staff development activities regarding middle level issues (Tadlock & LoGuidice, 1994). Professional development activities should be program specific, focusing on the unique needs of middle level students and middle level education.

Master Schedule. School officials should assess the master schedule for their school and determine if it provides the optimum method of program delivery for the school (Tadlock & LoGuidice, 1994). The master schedule at smaller schools is often tied to the elementary or high school schedule. The middle level schedule should work to reduce shared staff members with other levels, and should strive to include common planning time for grade level teachers. Innovative delivery methods might include the incorporation of elective wheels and team teaching.

Networking. Administrators in smaller districts should look for avenues to network, both formally and informally, with other middle level principals (Grigsby et al., 2002; Thomas et al., 2003). Often middle level principals will be the only administrator in the district facing problems unique to middle level education; and thus connecting with other middle level administrators will provide a good source of information and support.

Interdisciplinary Teaming. Schools should implement interdisciplinary teaming activities to the highest degree possible. Initially, teaming could range from having two teachers work on a common assignment with their students, to having the grade level teachers work on thematic units in the core subjects.

Advisory and Guidance Programs. Rural and small middle level schools should make efforts to develop and implement advisory programs for their students (Sardo-Brown & Shetlar, 1994). Guidance activities can be incorporated into a distinct homeroom or advisory program, or be included as part of an extended class period.

Every school is to some degree unique, shaped by the tradition, community needs, and personalities existing within that school setting. This is especially true of rural and smaller school districts. Smaller schools have distinct characteristics beneficial to middle level students. To maximize these benefits, continuous efforts must be made to

articulate and incorporate these positive attributes into the educational programs of the schools. By building on the positive characteristics, as well as identifying and addressing the obstacles encountered at smaller schools, middle level leaders can create and maintain distinctive and effective programs for their students.

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