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# Middle School Journal

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## Deferred but Not Deterred: A Middle School Manifesto

### \* *This We Believe* Characteristics

- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory

\*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

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Before providing a historical perspective on the middle level movement, examining its past successes and failures, and envisioning future improvements, I must declare my great admiration for our public schools. Although I am critical of certain recent developments, I believe that when historians look back on our civilization, they will point to our public school systems as America's greatest achievement. And today, in a climate of accountability, it is simply not fair nor appropriate to label public schools in the United States as failures. Schools and teachers have been and still are America's greatest resource for good. What would we do without them?

Public schools in the United States evolved without benefit of a master plan. The elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels developed rather independently of one another. Elementary schools were not established first, and young men attended colleges such as Harvard long before we organized public secondary schools. America's school systems developed piecemeal over time and are still very much works in progress. By the late 1800s, however, many states had organized elementary schools and high schools in an 8-4 pattern that would become the standard as our country began to put its revolutionary vision of education for all American youth into practice. The still relatively young middle school movement is part of the larger reorganization initiative that led to the creation of the junior high school in the first decade of the last century. The following four statements highlight relevant developments since then.



- Exactly 100 years have passed since the Indianola Junior High School, generally acknowledged as the first junior high school, was established in Columbus, Ohio, in 1909.
- In 1946, 37 years after the junior high school was introduced, the 6-3-3 pattern of school organization became the predominant pattern in the United States, replacing the 8-4 plan.
- In 1963, William Alexander, speaking at Cornell University, first advanced the term "middle school." This event, 46 years ago and just 17 years after the junior high school had become majority practice, is commonly used to mark the beginning of the middle school movement.
- By 1983, the new 5-3-4 plan of organization, featuring a grades six through eight middle school, had become the predominant pattern.

The movement to reorganize secondary education that began in 1909 might, then, be judged as highly successful, for it actually changed the face of American education twice in a century. The change to the 5-3-4 pattern is particularly remarkable. Just 20 years after entering the educational arena, the number of 6–8 middle schools exceeded the number of 7–9 junior high schools. That success, however, has been more in the realm of school organization than in the more critical programmatic areas so central in the vision of both types of middle level organization. Although it is seldom acknowledged, it should be noted that the junior high school advocated by its founders was to be, using the contemporary term, a "developmentally responsive" institution.

However, by the mid-1960s the junior high school was commonly viewed as failing. Captured by its parent, it had become what its ill chosen name implied—a junior *high* school. Could a somewhat similar conclusion be made about the middle school today? And might it be said that the junior high school was the first middle school, or that the middle school is simply today's version of the junior high school? Or, that the middle school movement is actually the rebirth of progressive education?

Like its predecessor, the middle school has come under heavy criticism. Because many students do not reach targeted academic goals, it has been labeled "the weak link in American education," primarily by those who believe the middle school's primary responsibility is to prepare students for advanced high school courses, and who presume that the school's concern for students as persons takes away from its academic responsibilities. The general public's perception, based largely on newspaper stories, that the middle school has been a failure is the result of the inability or unwillingness of critics to recognize the difference between the "middle school concept" and "the middle school" as it is commonly practiced. Because a school was newly labeled a middle school, observers assumed it was operating in ways that reflected the advocacy of its proponents, however, this was seldom the case.

The middle school concept is a philosophy of education with a special spirit and deep theoretical roots—a set of beliefs about kids, education, and the human experience. Those who adhere to it are passionate and determined advocates. The concept's ideals and recommendations are direct reflections of its two prime foundations, the nature and needs of young adolescents and the accepted principles of learning, both undergirded by a commitment to our democratic way of life. The middle school concept is applicable wherever any 10- to 15-year-olds are enrolled.

Jackson and Davis (2000), authors of the influential *Turning Points 2000*, refuted the notion that the middle school has failed and, instead, optimistically claimed, "Far from having failed, middle grades education is ripe for a great leap forward" (p. 17). And Dickinson (2001) has stated emphatically, "There is nothing wrong with the middle school concept. ... The concept is as valid today as it was in either of its previous iterations at the turn of the 20th century or in the early 1960s." The problem, he said, is that the middle school itself is suffering from "arrested development" (pp. 3–4). He was correct; but now, since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002) has been in force, mere arrested development has, regrettably, given way to regression.

The true middle school concept, it should be recognized, has not been practiced and found wanting; rather, it has been found difficult to implement fully, and is practiced, then, only partially. Putting it all into operation requires making changes that run counter to established school procedures; hence, the concept has not been practiced sufficiently or widely enough to be fairly assessed on a large-scale basis. The obvious success of the middle school as an organizational pattern, however, led those who did not understand the difference between the middle school concept and the middle school as a grade configuration to the false conclusion that the middle school concept was being implemented and was, therefore, the cause of the perceived failings.

### **Barriers to implementation**

A major barrier to more widespread implementation of the middle level philosophy is the lack of understanding among the general public about the period of early adolescence and an appreciation of its special importance. It has only been in recent decades that human development specialists have established a research base that informs educators and others about youth in this key transition period as childhood wanes and adolescence comes into its own, roughly between ages 10 and 15. Extensive research on the brain development of young adolescents has provided new insights that counter old assumptions and help us understand teens' behavior. Dr. Jay Giedd (n.d.), a neuroscientist at the National Institute of Mental Health, has conducted longitudinal studies that reveal extensive brain growth and changes occurring about the same time as puberty. The implications of these findings for educators and parents are significant. They provide scientific support for the beliefs about cognitive development upon which the foundation of the middle school concept rests. (See [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/interviews/giedd.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/interviews/giedd.html); Strauch, 2007)

Another barrier is the pervasive staying power of institutionalized schooling. Established bureaucracies in education perpetuate the status quo. The albatross of departmentalization, for instance, has been difficult to remove from the neck of middle level education, as it is supported by discipline-specific textbooks, tests, and teacher certification as well as long-standing tradition. The public also holds to a perception of what schools should be like that is not receptive to new ideas. Tyack and Cuban's highly regarded book *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (1995) offers valuable insights and a sound perspective on the whole process of school reform. They document the reality that reform is a slow and convoluted process, at best.

A statement made by the economist John Maynard Keynes highlights a related barrier. "The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise," Keynes noted, "lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping from old ones." The soundness of that judgment was apparent in the 1930s and 40s, when neither progressive education nor the proposed junior high school was able to find wide acceptance. Those "new ideas" revived and reshaped by the middle school movement are still having trouble escaping established practices. In large part, this is so because few educators have ever experienced schooling except in those old ways and, therefore, simply cannot envision how formal education could be conducted except via subjects, periods, and classes. Yet the standard practices of grouping middle school students by chronological age, placing them in classes of 25, and scheduling them in 45- to 50-minute periods are bereft of any research to justify their unquestioned continuation as the "right" way to conduct an educational program for young adolescents. Individual differences reach their peak in early adolescence as these young people, each at his or her own rate, mature physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and morally. Middle level schools, more so than schools at other levels, exist to serve diversity; and no scheme of school organization or federal mandate for uniform achievement can wash away human variability.

### **Positive exceptions**

There are, however, many examples of middle schools that have escaped old ways and implemented very successfully innovative ways of guiding the education of young adolescents. The Alpha team at Shelburne Community School in Vermont has been for 35 years an example of what can happen when educators break out of the conventional barriers (Kuntz, 2005). Putting aside existing practices, members of that multiage team created a highly successful education program that has helped young adolescents become independent learners and democratic citizens as well as high achievers. The Watershed, Soundings, and Crossroads programs at Radnor Middle School, Wayne, Pennsylvania (Springer 1994; 2006), are other impressive examples that exemplify how meaningful educational experiences can be when freed from the restrictions of classes, periods, and subjects. Students in these programs equal or exceed their peers in academic achievement, while gaining the skills and dispositions to be lifelong learners and responsible adults. These striking examples of highly successful middle school programs do not stand alone.

In hundreds of middle schools around the country, the middle school concept is in practice to a significant degree, and in those communities, parents are more than pleased with the education their children receive. For example, in 2009 there were more than 190 high-performing middle schools in 18 states selected as Schools To Watch under the program sponsored by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform ([www.schoolstowatch.org/what.htm](http://www.schoolstowatch.org/what.htm)). These schools met the exacting nationally established criteria in the areas of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity, with appropriate organizational structure and processes. Following their selection, they have served as mentors and models. Anyone who has spent time in one of the Schools to Watch knows how "right" it is for the students lucky enough to attend—and for the professional teachers who gladly give so much of themselves in guiding the learning and development of young adolescents in these true learning communities.

Major research studies, including some involving networks of schools that have practiced the middle school tenets sufficiently, have made it possible to claim with confidence: When the middle school concept is implemented substantially over time, student achievement, including measures by standardized tests, rises, and substantial improvement in fulfilling the other broader, more enduring goals of an education results (see *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*, NMSA, 2003, and Felner et al., 1997).

Unfortunately, however, the current state and national reform and accountability efforts, ignoring this body of research, continue to try to improve schools as they *currently* are organized, rather than breaking out of existing patterns and instituting changes that are more in harmony with the middle school concept. It is time for educators to end the charade of attempting to correct the acknowledged flaws of middle level schooling by making adjustments in the prevailing system, which is outdated, obsolete, and no longer capable of lasting improvement using cosmetic measures. Its curriculum and typical passive instructional approaches were designed for another era, a vastly different student body, and a society markedly unlike our current culture. This was true even before technology expanded the ways students could learn and wrested from teachers considerable control over what students study. Technology, incidentally, has reinforced those elements that make the middle school concept special—collaborative learning, strong student voice, and students engaged with larger world issues.

### **The narrowing of education**

Historically, public schools in America took responsibility for the social and character education of students just as much as they did for their skill and knowledge development—and parents wanted them to. Over time, however, the attention schools give to molding good citizens and good persons has diminished. The personal-social development of students has simply become less intentional on the part of teachers and schools—although, not where the middle school concept is practiced. This shift in the understanding of what an education entails was evident in the "back-to-the-basics" years and in the days following Sputnik when science and mathematics took center stage. Then in 2002, NCLB, with its fostering of an obsession with testing, further eroded attention to anything that was not perceived as directly related to achieving acceptable test scores. Now, it seems the public—and, indeed, much of the profession—has become resigned to letting the temporary acquisition of information as measured by paper and pencil tests define an education.

This tendency to narrow what comprises an education comes at a time when our society is besieged with major problems, all of which result directly from the consciously chosen behaviors of individuals, ranging from unruly kids on the school bus and cyber-bullying to petty crimes; from random acts of violence on the street to high crimes in corporate executive offices; from domestic violence, to teen pregnancy, to drug addiction, and on and on. It is imperative that youth receive guidance in the non-cognitive aspects of an education from those given the responsibility of providing a formal education. Middle level schools are the most appropriate places to influence students' personal-social behavior; for one's adult behavior runs in channels cut deep during early adolescence. Inescapably, middle school teaching is a moral enterprise, and

an education in its fullest sense has to involve heart as well as head, attitude as well as information, spirit as well as scholarship, and conscience as well as competence.

The middle school is not just a physical place in which teachers teach about things needed in the future, it is an environment in which youth come of age, acting out new roles as maturing social beings. It is not a teaching factory but a laboratory of living—not just a learning place, but also a growing place. And what the process of education teaches young adolescents about themselves is likely to have a more lasting impact than the content of the curriculum. If middle level schools do not fulfill their historic pastoral role and help develop ethical, responsible, self-reliant, and clear-thinking individuals, they will have failed at what is, ultimately, their most important responsibility.

### **A broader view**

Educators must help the public grasp a bigger and better vision of what constitutes an "education" with its many facets and understand the dynamics and intricacies of teaching, which is so much more than instructing, testing, and grading. Teachers shape lives less by direct instruction than by what I call "wayside teaching"—those small personal acts, probing questions, subtle reminders, earned commendations, and individual challenges. Their influence when formally presenting information to a class is likely to pale in significance compared to the impact they may have in a 30-second, up close and personal conversation. Citizens all need to become fully aware of the importance of the teacher as a person and model, and appreciate the significance of the experiences youth undergo both in and out of school during these years when they are vulnerable and malleable. Early adolescence provides a window of opportunity to impact the lives of students in enduring ways, one that opens but once and is mostly closed by the tenth grade.

The public also must come to recognize that success, both in future schooling and in life itself, will depend not so much on what courses have been passed but rather on what skills, dispositions, and habits of mind have been developed. When the widely accepted goal of academic excellence is examined thoughtfully, it really comes down to those skills and attitudes more so than the possession of certain bodies of knowledge. And the overemphasis on improving test scores works against developing the very attributes needed to succeed in today's global society—initiative; effectiveness in working as a part of a team; and the ability to organize information, articulate ideas, and solve problems. Reports that cite the characteristics desired in employees all put teamwork at the top of the list of needed skills, along with problem solving and effective oral communication—behaviors not readily acquired from teaching procedures used to prepare students for standardized tests.

America needs middle schools with missions big enough to help young adolescents decide what to read as well as how to read and big enough, for example, to ensure that their mastery of mathematics will not be applied in an embezzlement scheme. John Ruskin claimed: "Education does not mean teaching people to know what they do not know. It means teaching them to behave as they do not behave." And Teddy Roosevelt warned: "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society."

Mother Nature provides, at this key transition time of life, a golden opportunity for middle level educators to both influence the behavior of individuals and to take learning to a higher level, challenging students intellectually and engaging them actively in the teaching-learning enterprise. Sometime during the middle level years, students reach a level of mental maturity that permits them to be analytical, to question, to hypothesize. They are ripe for being immersed in their education in new and more meaningful ways, as they are capable of learning and achieving at levels seldom realized. Prescribing specific content for young adolescents in an attempt to mass-produce a good education is counter-productive. Yet educators, usually well beyond the classroom, continue to specify curricular content in the pious hope that enforced uniformity will produce excellence. The presentation of canned content, however, is not effective in advancing the *intellectual* development of students.

## Future prospects

Public education itself has been under attack in America, however quietly and slowly, for many years. The middle school movement, progressive as it is, has been a prime target for those forces that do not share the belief middle level advocates hold about the importance of a democratic, student-centered education. The future success of the middle school movement has implications that go far beyond the fate of just those middle level grades, for the success of other theoretically sound reform efforts is closely tied to the middle school movement. Having almost weathered the storm of NCLB—though sustaining considerable damage—can the middle school movement continue to be the green and growing edge of lasting reform? Can it lead the way to restoring pride in public education and its place of prominence in America?

What is past is prologue. And so I return to the Eight-Year Study (Aikin, 1942) conducted in the late 1930s to find a perspective that fits what we should be about in the days ahead. The 30 experimental schools, some will recall, were free to establish their programs without concern for the college prep curriculum that hog-tied the secondary schools of that day. The work of these pioneer educators was guided by two major principles. The first was "The general life of the school and methods of teaching should conform to what is now known about the ways in which human beings learn and grow" (p. 18). The second was "That the high school in the United States should re-discover its chief reason for existence" (p. 18). The 30 schools realized

The primary purpose of education is to lead our young people to understand, to appreciate, and to live the kind of life for which we as a people have been striving throughout our history. Other things are important, but only relatively so. It is necessary to teach the three 'Rs,' science, language, history, mathematics, and arts, safety, vocations, and most of the other subjects that now crowd the curriculum of the schools; but unless our young people catch the vision which has led us on through all generations, we perish. Year after year the conviction became clearer and deeper that the school itself should become a demonstration of the kind of life in which this nation believes. (pp. 18–19)

Following these principles, the educators in those schools believed

The school should become a place in which young people work together at tasks which are clearly related to their purposes. No longer should teachers, students, or parents think of school simply as a place to do what was laid out to be done. The school should be a living social organism of which each student is a vital part. It should be a place to which one goes gladly because there he can engage in activities which satisfy his desires, work at the solution of problems which he faces in everyday living, and have opened to him new interests and wider horizons. (p. 17)

The middle school concept and those who seek to bring it to full life hold to these two principles and envision just such a school. There is a timelessness about these ideals. They may be deferred, but they will not be defeated. Contemporary leaders should take heart and be more determined than ever as they realize that common sense, the realities of human development, proven principles of pedagogy, substantial research, the consistency of recommendations by reputable associations, our national heritage, and our personal beliefs as humane educators all are aligned with the vision that National Middle School Association (2003) has delineated in *This We Believe*. With such support, educators who see themselves as architects of change should be emboldened as they vigorously pursue the grand vision that is, and continues to be, the middle school concept.

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