Renewing the Middle School: The Early Success of Middle School Education

Paul S. George

For the last 40 years, I have had the privilege of being a participant/observer/reporter in middle grades education in a wide variety of circumstances, both in the United States and abroad. During this lengthy period, I have observed and reported on what I consider to be a continuing series of accomplishments in middle grades education. Many of these endeavors seem unknown or unacknowledged by those outside the middle school movement. Perhaps many educators new to, or on the margins of, middle grades education are also unaware of these achievements. It would take more than this article to fairly catalog the successes that middle school educators in America and elsewhere have accomplished during this nearly half century. An abbreviated account will have to suffice.

Origins of subsequent problems

Beginning in the early 1960s, middle school educators attempted to implement a less than fully developed model—something called the middle school concept—with dramatically little direction, even less support, and a considerable degree of resistance, if not hostility. I recall, for example, at an early meeting of the Florida League of Middle Schools in 1972, an important figure in the Florida Department of Education spoke from the podium to the assembled group of several hundred public school and university educators, asking rhetorically, "What is a middle school, really?" He meant to suggest with that question that no one knew the characteristics that should define such a school. He was correct. No one at that time, certainly no one in the state department of education, really seemed to know what a middle school was supposed to be. This, of course, begs the important question as to why Florida, and soon an entire nation, would move fairly quickly into the process of reorganizing K–12 schooling to include a separate middle school when, apparently, no one was clear about the characteristics of an exemplary middle school. Hundreds of schools, thousands of educators, and hundreds of thousands of students and families were affected. What propelled this change?

Many school district and state level decision makers seem to have been motivated to consider new grade configurations for K–12 schools because of factors unrelated to providing the best education for young adolescents. In the South, and elsewhere, one these factors was the pressure to accommodate school district racial desegregation (George & Alexander, 2003).

In dozens of districts of all shapes and sizes, school planners and policymakers made an important discovery. One could redesign a district to facilitate racial desegregation by closing the junior high school(s) and moving the ninth grade to the newly desegregated high school, and then moving the fifth and/or sixth grade(s) out of the segregated elementary schools and creating new and desegregated middle schools. The result would be a plan for a dramatically more desegregated school district very likely to receive court approval. Hundreds of middle schools opened in the late l960s and early l970s were products of this effort. As can be imagined, school planners directed far more effort and attention toward facilitating the desegregation of the district than creating exemplary programs for educating young adolescents, especially since few seemed to know what these programs should be (George, Morgan, & Jenkins, 1997).

A decade or so later, in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the changing demographic patterns in the Northeast and Midwest brought new challenges related to managing school enrollments for planners in those regions (George & Alexander, 2003). Buildings in some districts were far below capacity in the upper grades, to the point that high schools might have

of school district capital outlay, and innovative, via the creation of new middle schools. This was, as time proved, an irresistible combination for policymakers facing the problem of underused high schools and overcrowded elementary schools. Hundreds of middle schools were organized to allow more full and equitable use of school facilities (George & Alexander, 2003).

Another wave of new middle schools emerged as a result of the educational tumult following the publication of the *Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, l983). In response to the report, virtually every state in the nation implemented laws intended to infuse high school programs with new rigor. In many states, the ninth grade continued to be counted as a high school grade; consequently, the ninth grade program became more intensely dominated by graduation requirements and other contingencies that made its presence in a middle grades school increasingly problematic.

More and more, district decision makers found it difficult to defend the presence of the ninth grade in a junior high school organization. This was especially true if there were also other pressing reasons for those students to be relocated to the high school, such as

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to be closed—a hitherto unheard of and undesirable option. High schools tend to be the subject of great loyalty and nostalgia, and no one likes to see one close. In other districts, new growth brought a surge of new enrollment in the early grades of the elementary school, leaving crowded classrooms in those buildings. In still other districts, both scenarios happened at once, causing crowding in some elementary schools and underuse of some high school facilities.

In one of these latter districts, a school planner or policymaker probably first had an insight that spurred the development of even greater numbers of separate middle schools. Why not reconfigure the junior high schools by moving the ninth grade into the high school(s), increasing enrollment there by 33 percent, and moving the sixth grade out of the elementary school(s) to create new "middle schools"? School boards could be simultaneously fiscally conservative, in terms

enrollment or school desegregation concerns. It was at this point in the 1980s that momentum increased for districts to reorganize into 6–8 or 7–8 configurations.

This is not to say that, during this period, there were not many hundreds of educators who sought to implement middle school programs that were developmentally appropriate. The astonishing accomplishment of this period, in my view, was the emergence of greater clarity about the essential components of an exemplary middle school (e.g., National Middle School Association, 1982, 1995). This achievement came as a result, I believe, of an increased awareness among many educators of the nature of the early adolescence developmental period—the stage of development that the middle school concept was designed to address. This awareness grew, even while educators were responding to monumental pressures to achieve other social and administrative goals. Clarity and

A team of teachers collaborates during common planning time.

the *NASSP Bulletin*. National foundations such as W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment were helpful in funding middle school reform efforts. The Carnegie Corporation was particularly supportive of middle grades reform, with the publication of two *Turning Points* volumes (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1898; Jackson & Davis, 2000) and the follow-up funding of a number of related efforts.[1] The emergence of a national accord to promote best practices for the education of young adolescents was an achievement that grew from several decades of devoted effort.

Heightened awareness of early adolescence

Although the needs of young adolescents were not always at the center of school planners' efforts during those decades, ironically, an important outgrowth of this extensive reorganization in schools for young adolescents was a significant increase in the awareness of educators that the transition from childhood to adolescence was much longer and more complicated than had been previously realized. Increasing numbers of educational leaders endeavored to tailor school organization and programs to the needs of students in this developmental period. Developmental psychologists studied the lack of fit between students' needs and the organization and curriculum of many schools (e.g., Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991).

consensus emerged, in spite of often poorly designed and incompetently delivered professional development and the absence of an emphasis on middle level education at that time in America's college and university teacher education programs (McEwin, 1983). While a growing number of policymakers and educators embraced the emerging middle school concept, many others failed to grasp its significance and pushed back against change.

Middle school educators had no giant laboratories like drug companies or vast testing grounds like automobile companies. While a national consensus on the middle school concept emerged among those

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who studied the education of young adolescents and the organization of schools to best educate them, this ever-widening movement was a relatively uncoordinated grassroots process that grew over nearly four decades. Knowledge about what worked well was communicated at state and national conferences—first Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), then later National Middle School Association (NMSA) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)—at hundreds of regional and local workshops, and through an ever-growing variety of publications such as *Middle School Journal, Educational Leadership*, and

more than 15,000 middle level schools, the emerging consensus surrounding developmentally appropriate programs centered on the strategies and practices found to be most effective by early and later adopters of the middle school concept. Among those practices, the interdisciplinary team organization probably stands as the movement's most significant contribution to educational organization (Dickinson & Erb, 1997). Virtually every model or set of recommendations for the reform of middle and high school education includes some version of teacher teamwork (e.g., Wilcox & Angelis, 2007).

Interdisciplinary team organization

Interdisciplinary team organization grew out of a lengthy process of discovery, trial, and error. The district where I live and work (Alachua County, Florida) was one of the earliest adopters of the middle school concept, and it employed one of the first groups of educators to attempt the implementation of a new method of organizing teachers and learners at that level. Our first attempts at what we called "teaming" focused on curriculum. We believed, in that first year or two, that teaming meant the integration of the curriculum in ways that were reminiscent of the core curriculum popular in the middle and secondary grades decades earlier (e.g., Lipka, Lounsbury, Toepfer, Vars, Alessi, & Kridel, 1998). Groups of educators spent the summer prior to the opening of new middle schools in the district designing sophisticated interdisciplinary curriculum units that we thought teachers would implement. When that did not happen, the next summer's workshops focused on "individualized instruction," one of the buzzwords of the

1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Kasak & Uskali, 2005).

Other organizational successes

In their attempts to fit school organization more closely to the characteristics and needs of young adolescents, middle school educators invented or updated, polished, and popularized a number of other strategies for personalizing the learning environment. In recent years, many of these strategies have been adopted by high school and elementary school leaders.

Flexible block schedule. Middle school educators sought relief from the rigid and inflexible schedules of the typical secondary school. Teams of teachers who collaborated in developing a responsive educational program required a schedule they could control and adapt. The flexible block schedule was the result. Not to be confused with the more recent long block schedule that began at the high school level, the flexible block provided teachers with common planning time and a

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time. That fall, teachers continued to teach much as they always had. The third summer we finally got it right, realizing from our experience that teaming was really more of a method of organizing teachers and learners than it was a curriculum plan or an instructional strategy. This was a major breakthrough.

Our district's middle school educators began to focus on what they could achieve by sharing the same students, the same teaching schedule, common planning time, and the same areas of the building as well as the responsibility for coordinating the major components of every student's educational experience. Common behavior management plans, collaborative parent conferences, and, yes, integrated curriculum units emerged from teachers' work together on behalf of the same group of students. Other educators, in dozens of other districts, sooner or later arrived at the same point. As a consequence, many believe that the interdisciplinary team organization has been the middle school movement's most significant contribution to middle grades reform (Erb, 2001; Erb & Dickinson,

large block of instructional time, often as long as three or four hours, that they could use as their teaching plans dictated (Merenbloom, 1996).[2]

Multiage grouping, looping, and school-within-school strategies. Having discovered that the better they knew their students, the better educational outcomes were, middle school educators often combined interdisciplinary team organization with strategies to extend the time that the same group of teachers and students spent together. Multiage grouping led to teams composed of equal numbers of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Each year, a multiage team graduates eighth graders and takes in a new group of sixth graders. In looping, teachers and students from the same grade level would move together from sixth through eighth grades; eighth graders moved on to the high school and their teachers "looped" back to the sixth grade to begin the process anew. In the school-within-school model, the school would be divided into "houses" and, while students had different teachers every year, they stayed in the same part of the building for three years and moved

as a team to a new set of teachers each year (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

Additional achievements. In addition to accomplishments that directly resulted from the middle school movement, it is to the credit of middle school educators that, while all of this reorganization was occurring, they managed to also incorporate into their schools a number of important practices that were being implemented across the public school spectrum. For example, middle level administrators helped transform the role of school leaders from building managers into instructional leaders. Middle school educators moved to redesign the curriculum from what had been something of a shapeless mystery to a standards-based program accessible to both parents and the larger community. Middle school educators participated as equal partners in the move to significantly improve the level of teacher quality. School facilities have been dramatically redesigned to support middle school best practices (George, 2003; Sullivan, 1996).

In the last 30 years, middle school educators also have been prominent among those who have radically revised the expectations and mechanisms for parent and community involvement. Middle school educators led the way to a new style of shared decision making in which teachers and administrators sit down with parents and others to make the decisions that affect the school lives of all who work and study within. Middle school educators have faced the challenge of moving beyond mainstreaming to inclusion using co-teaching and collaboration. Over this same period, middle school educators have steadily raised academic achievement in reading, mathematics, and other areas to perhaps their highest levels ever across the population.

I cannot review all of this activity over so many years, often undertaken in circumstances of capricious urgency with meager levels of support, without concluding that, in many ways, the middle school movement is an amazing success story in the history of American education. The existence of thousands of high-quality middle schools is evidence of this major achievement.

Editor's Notes

[1] The results of the Carnegie studies of middle school reform have been published in a number of places. Prominent among these are the following: Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers (1997) in

Phi Delta Kappan; From Faith to Facts: Turning Points in Action, a column in *Middle School Journal*, Stevenson & Erb (1998), Erb & Stevenson (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c); Research on Middle School Renewal, another *Middle School Journal* column, Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall (1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005), Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall (2003, 2005), Mulhall, Flowers, & Mertens (2002, 2004), Mulhall, Mertens, & Flowers (2001); and *Turning Points 2000—Lessons Learned*, currently appearing in *Middle School Journal*, Andrews (2008a, 2008b), Andrews & Jackson (2007), Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews (2009).

[2] For more on the topic of scheduling at the middle level, see the May 1998 issue of *Middle School Journal* and Hackmann (2002).

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Paul S. George is distinguished professor emeritus at the University of Florida in Gainesville, FL. E-mail: pgeorge@coe.ufl.edu