

K-8 Comeback: Clear Merits over Middle School Model

AWSNA

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Middle school has a particular reputation, and it's not necessarily a good one. Children often approach these years of schooling (Grades 6-8 or 7-8) anxiously -- concerned about cliques, closed-off cafeteria tables, and bullies roaming the halls. Parents send children into these schools with trepidation as well. But, for some it may come as a surprise to learn that educators are also regarding middle school environments with increasing criticism.

In fact, educational psychologist, Dr. Cheri Pierson Yecke in her [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#) study [Mayhem in the Middle](#) says that junior high is, "where academic achievement goes to die." And while the statement is provocative, the data she mined, along with that uncovered by others, does reveal an unfortunate academic decline for students who attend a new school for Grades 6-8.

More disturbingly, those same studies show that the dip in academics is a permanent dip not recovered in later years of schooling. A 2008 study out of North Carolina published in [the Journal of](#)

[Policy Analysis and Management](#) compared the academic achievement trajectories of sixth graders in K-8 environments versus those in sixth- through eighth-grade schools.

Researchers Philip Cook, Robert MacCoun, Clara Muschkin, and Jacob Vigdor found a higher incidence of both behavioral and academic problems among the children in the junior high environment. Authors note, “Students who attend middle school in sixth grade are twice as likely to be disciplined relative to their counterparts in elementary school... [and] exposing sixth graders to older peers has persistent negative consequences on their academic trajectories.”

This trend emerged in a myriad of other studies which are as discussed in detail in the [Education Next Magazine](#) article [The Middle School Plunge](#). Harvard and Columbia researchers Benjamin Lockwood and Jonah Rockoff ran the numbers and found the same disturbing trend.

“We find that moving to a middle school causes a substantial drop in student test scores (relative to that of students who remain in K–8 schools) the first year in which the transition takes place, not just in New York City but also in the big cities, suburbs, and small-town and rural areas of Florida. Further, we find that the relative achievement of middle-school students continues to decline in the subsequent years they spend in such schools. Nor do we find any sign that the middle-school students catch up with those who remained in the K–8 environment once all of them have entered high school.”

According to Lockwood and Rockoff, the takeaway is simply this: “The overall climate for student learning is worse in middle schools than in schools that serve students from elementary school through the eighth grade.”

But why? [A recent study](#) out of Syracuse University posits an answer. Published in American Educational Research Journal - Social and Institutional Analysis, September 15, 2016, the study’s researchers believe they have isolated a “top dog” effect that stabilizes both the academic and social environment for adolescents in K-8 schools.

Study author Michah W. Rothbart says, “Top dog [vs.] bottom dog status on bullying, safety, belonging, and academic achievement... improves the learning environment and academic achievement. We further find that the top dog effect is strongest in sixth grade and in schools with longer grade spans...”

Meaning, as Rothbart told NPR for their article, [Sixth Grade Is Tough: It Helps To Be 'Top Dog'](#): “the negative effects of being a bottom dog don't just come from being new to the school: The students who transferred into a K-8 school in sixth grade still had better experiences than students who started at a 6-8 school.”

This then logically calls into question the bottom dog effect of ninth graders in high school. The data mined from the Florida Department of Education’s PK-20 Education Data Warehouse, reported on at [Education Next](#), did find a universal dip in academics amongst ninth graders. The academic decline, however, was smaller than the drop for those entering middle school and the decline did not persist past ninth grade as it did in middle school declines.

The new question to analyze then became whether or not middle school students would benefit from the transitional nature of the middle school, as it would likely prep them for high school more so than an elemiddle, K-8 environment.

This prompted the researchers, Lockwood and Rockoff, to look at ninth grade declines between those who attended K-8 vs Grade 6-8 schools prior to entering high school. They found that sixth graders entering a middle school environment suffered 0.23 standard deviations in math and 0.14 standard deviations in reading compared to their K-8 sixth grade peers and they never recovered this decline.

All the ninth graders entering a Grade 9-12 high school, from both environments, suffered 0.03 standard deviations in math and 0.04 standard deviations in reading, but saw their “achievement trajectories become positive again” after the transition.

Therefore, they say, “We can safely reject the hypothesis that students who attend middle schools benefit at the transition to high school from their previous experience with school transition or from the specific educational programs available in middle schools.”

This [study out of UC Santa Barbara](#) also looked at this transition to high school question and even took achievement scores out of the success equation. Instead of focusing on test scores, these researchers looked instead at on-time high school completion as a measure of success.

They wanted to know if middle school students, regardless of academic levels, benefited from one of middle school’s original intentions -- helping more students complete high school by focusing on preparing them for the high school environment. But authors Kelly Bedard and Chau Do uncovered more bad news. They found, “In contrast to the stated objective, we find that moving to a middle school system decreases on-time high school completion by approximately 1-3 percent.”

Considering all this, it is any wonder that [Education Next has reported](#) that “elemiddle” schools are on the rise, jumping from 4,000 nationwide to near 7,000 in the last ten years? It would seem educators’ original good intentions – to create a specialized environment to better meet the needs of early adolescence – has completely backfired. As it turns out, what children this age need is stability and a secure and familiar environment from which to comfortably challenge themselves academically and socially.

The elemiddle K-8 environment, in this way, does not hold young adolescents back, but instead gives them a safe harbor in which to be docked as they venture out onto unfamiliar shores. In this environment, young adolescents can be leaders and challenge themselves with a sense of security. They know their place well and can remain confident in some areas while exploring new areas where they must gain confidence.