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CAROLYN BUNTING

# Middle Schools vs. K-8 Schools



Middle school is touted as the last best chance for early adolescents. Yet my years as a middle school administrator have led me to question this claim. I have come to believe that middle school has been oversold at the cost of time, money, and the futures of the student population it seeks to serve.

Middle school came to life a generation ago somewhat unexpectedly. No pressing problems forced its emergence; no new research pleaded its cause. Middle school came to be because the time was right—programs for younger children had just experienced a long run of success, and it was natural and appropriate to turn attention to the next level.

Middle school was to be different from junior high. It was, in fact, to be the anti-junior high. Competition in classrooms and in extracurricular activities would reduce from a roar to a whisper. Rules and standards would shift from clear and firm to open and flexible. Academics would veer from a mainline course to a developmentally sensitive track. Life in middle school was to be relevant, comfortable, and relaxed with plenty of time to reflect on the experience of being an early adolescent.

Despite good intentions, middle school has tended to work against the development of early adolescents. Flexibility in procedures has become a pathway to uncertainty, confusion, and even laxness; relevancy as a standard for curricula has fostered deep learning gaps; and setting apart early adolescents as a group unto themselves has fueled the growth of a debilitating peer culture.

**Although far from a trend, K-8 schools are drawing a wide and sympathetic following.**

A RAND report, "Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School," documents concerns about middle schools, labeling middle school as the Bermuda Triangle that leaves early adolescents feeling unsafe, socially isolated, and academically unchallenged. The report notes that fewer than one out of three of the nation's eighth graders met proficiency standards set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2004, a finding that only slightly improved in NAEP's 2009 assessment. The RAND report also cited findings from the 2003 Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) that show U.S. youngsters tumbling from a top ranking at grade 4 to a position below many third-world countries by grade 8. The most recent TIMSS assessment (2007) continues to place eighth graders near the bottom on international measures of science and math.

More mystifying than the academic status of middle schoolers is their emotional state. The RAND report explains that U.S. early adolescents place themselves well below international counterparts when it comes to feeling personally comfortable in school. It seems that the motivating mission of middle schools—creating a nurturing environment in which students thrive both personally and academically—is well off course.

There are, however, successful middle schools where students learn, gain personal confidence, develop wholesome values, and build nurturing relationships. But the RAND report found too few successful middle schools and too many that were troubled.

The case against middle school is a strong one. Its complex social demands, combined with the volatility of early adolescence, make for an uneasy chemistry. Middle school students fall easily for the allure of cliques,



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become seduced by commercialism, and become less inclined to disciplined learning. The anxiety of growth and change, coupled with the need for comfort and connection, can lead early adolescents in many unhealthy directions left unguarded by middle schools.

K-8, on the other hand, offers the continuity youngsters need during the upheaval of early adolescence. Connected to the familiar and with the advantage of being known, K-8 students face greater certainty than their middle school counterparts. Their place is both predictable and secure: They are known academically and personally and they have the advantage of lessons learned over time from older role models. K-8 schools don't have the glitz and glamour that highlights much of the middle school experience, but offer instead the up close and personal opportunities that come from familiarity with place and people.

But is the answer a return to the K-8 model? The RAND report advises its consideration, and many communities have done just that. Troubled urban systems such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and New York City are in the process of conversion, as are a growing number of smaller systems. Evidence of success from these early conversions is limited and far from conclusive. However, although far from a trend, K-8 schools are drawing a wide and sympathetic following.

It is unclear what lies ahead for early adolescent schooling, but a single question underlies decision-making: Do surging new hormones and unsettled psyches create the best time to uproot youngsters? Oversized, under-controlled and set apart, middle schools too often only offer a whirlpool of lost opportunity. K-8 schools do things differently, offering a way through early adolescence without sacrificing the benefits of established community, age diversity, or being known over time by those who teach and lead.

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