

Research Summaries

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NMSA Research Summary #1 Grade Configuration (1996)

Question: What grade configuration is best for the middle grades?

Grade Configuration

It is difficult to say definitively that one particular grade configuration is "best." However, trends over the past two decades indicate a shift from junior high schools (grades 7-9) to middle schools (grades 5-8 and grades 6-8). Several national studies documented the growth in the percentage of schools organized in the 6-7-8 pattern from 15% (Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, & Keefe, 1981), to 40% (Alexander & McEwin, 1989) to 50% (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993), to 55% (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1995), to 59% (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzo, in press). This latest national study reported that only 5% of the middle grades schools in 2000 were 7-9 schools. In a 1993 national study, 65% of the principals reported that their schools had moved to a 5-8 or 6-8 grade configuration, as compared to 25% reporting such a change in 1981 (Valentine, et al., 1993). A more recent national study found that 76% of the middle level schools had made the transition to 5-8 or 6-8 configurations and that 45% of those middle level schools made the transition during the 1990s. (Valentine, et al., in press). Researchers at the Middle Level Leadership Center (Valentine, 2000) have documented the grade configuration trends by number of schools and percentage of change over the past three decades (Table 1).

Table 1

Middle Level Grade Configurations 1971-2000

Grade Configuration	1971	% 1971 Total	1981	% 1981 Total	1991	% 1991 Total	2000	% 2000 Total	1971-2000 Change	1971-2000 % Change
5-8	772	7%	1,024	8%	1,330	11%	1,379	10%	+607	+7%
6-8	1,662	16%	3,070	25%	4,838	40%	8,371	59%	+6,709	+40%
7-8	2,450	24%	2,628	22%	2,902	24%	2,390	17%	-60	-2%
7-9	4,711	45%	4,004	33%	2,298	19%	689	5%	-4,022	-85%

Other	850	8%	1,500	12%	727	6%	1,278	9%	+428	+51
TOTAL	10,445	100%	12,226	100%	12,095	100%	14,107	100%	+3,662	+3.

Perceptions of Ideal Grade Configurations

Most administrators consider the 6-8 grade configuration as ideal for developmentally appropriate middle level programs. When principals were asked in 2000 to identify the ideal grade configuration, 65% chose the 6-8 configuration, 9% chose 5-8, 16% chose 7-8, and 3% chose the 7-9 configuration (Valentine, et al., in press).

Since changing schools often brings anxiety related to interruption of peer groups (Simmon & Blyth, 1987), it is important that students transition into schools that accommodate the needs of young adolescents. Some educators recommend including fifth grade in the middle level school (see Research Summary #8, Grade 5 in the Middle School, for more detailed information). Middle schools have made deliberate attempts to provide structures, such as teaming and advisor/advisee programs, that create smaller groups to foster caring relationships. Such an environment is less likely to be found in 7-9 schools, which tend to be organized departmentally. Sixty-one percent of principals believed that a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade level clustering is the most developmentally responsive, while 16% chose a K-6, 7-8, 9-12 clustering, 14% chose a K-4, 5-8, 9-12 clustering, and 8% chose a K-6, 7-9, 10-12 clustering (Valentine, et al., in press).

National Studies

Effective programs and practices, not grade configuration, determine quality schools. Researchers found that middle grades practices most responsive to the needs of young adolescents were found in schools with configurations of 6-8 grades. Such practices address social, personal, and academic development through strong advisory programs, activity periods, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary teaming, and exploratory classes.

Epstein and MacIver (1990) concluded that grade configuration makes a real difference in the education of young adolescents because middle schools (6-8 and 5-8 grade configurations) implement more of the recommended middle level practices.

Alexander and McEwin (1989) and McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (1995) reported that the 6-8 grade configuration is most popular and that the middle school organization of grades 6-8 is most likely to provide the key characteristics of recommended practices and programs for young adolescents. However, they also found that grades 5-8 schools, although far less numerous, were about as likely to have these characteristics as grades 6-8 ones" (p. 84).

The incorporation of recommended practices for young adolescents remains the key to being effective with the 10-14 age group. Regardless of grade configuration, principals rated their programs higher if they used such practices as interdisciplinary teams of teachers, common planning time, 8-period days, flexible schedules, activity periods, and cooperative learning. The implementation of good practices and strong programs, not grade configuration, determines effectiveness of schools for young adolescents (National Middle School Association, 1995).

Related Readings

Epstein, J. L. (1990). What matters in the middle grades—grade span or practices? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71(6), 438-444.

MacIver, D. J., & Epstein, J. L. (1993). Middle grades research: Not yet mature, but no longer a child. *The Elementary School Journal*, 93(5), 519-533.

Hough, D. L. (January, 1995). The elemiddle school: A model for middle grades reform. *Principal*, 6-9.

Irvin, J. L., Valentine, J. W., & Clark, D. C. (1994). Essential elements of a true middle school: What should be vs. what is. *Middle School Journal*, 26(1), 54-58.

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Alexander, W. M., & McEwin, C. K. (1989). *Schools in the middle: Status and progress*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

Epstein, J. L., & MacIver, D. J. (1990). *Education in the middle grades: Overview of national practices and trends*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

McEwin, C. K., Dickinson, T. S., & Jenkins, D. (1995). *America's middle schools: Practices and programs—A 25-year perspective*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

National Middle School Association. (1995). *This we believe: Developmentally responsive middle level schools*. Columbus, OH: Author.

Simmons, R. O., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). *Moving into adolescence*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Valentine, J. W. (2000). United States middle level grade organizational trends. [On-line]. Available: <http://www.mllc.org/docs/USMLTrends>.

Valentine, J. W., Clark, D., Hackmann, D., & Petzo, V. (in press). *Leadership in middle level schools, volume I: A national study of middle level leaders and school programs*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

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Updated Summary

The original version of this research summary was developed in the mid-1990s. The summary was updated September 2001.

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Manuscript Review Process

Manuscripts prepared for this Research Summary Series are reviewed by scholars with expertise in the summary topic. This review/referee process provides the opportunity for authors to receive feedback for manuscript refinement, and provides the editor with information necessary to determine the professional quality and appropriateness of the manuscript for publication.

Research Summary Coordination/Preparation

The staff of the Middle Level Leadership Center (MLLC) coordinated the development of this research summary. The mission of the MLLC is to provide research and service to middle level educators. To accomplish that mission, Center staff members work with national organizations, such as National Middle School Association, to disseminate research information about middle level education. The MLLC operates within the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Research Summary Development and Submissions

The Research Committee of National Middle School Association, working in conjunction with NMSA staff, determines the topics for the NMSA Research Summary Series. Inquiries about future topics and interest in manuscript preparation should be made by e-mail to Dr. Jerry Valentine at ValentineJ@missouri.edu. Research findings that will enrich existing summaries are always welcome.

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