

Middle School Muddle

Research shows that K-8 schools are better than separate K-6 and 7-8 schools.

By Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kaganoff, Catherine Augustine, and Louay Constant

The Wonder Years, a sitcom that appeared on television from 1988 to 1993, described the problems and dreams of a suburban boy coming of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The boy's middle school years, as the show portrayed them, were believably complicated but "wonderful" nonetheless.

These days, the reputation of the middle school challenges any notion of "wonder years". These schools are often blamed for the increase in behavioural problems among young teens and cited as the cause of teens' alienation, disengagement from school, and low achievement.

A team of researchers from RAND Education set out to examine whether middle schools deserve their negative reputation. We collected and synthesized literature describing pertinent research conducted during the past 50 years.

To understand the challenges in today's middle schools, it is helpful to have some understanding of their history. In 1900, the predominant school configuration consisted of eight years of primary school and four years of secondary school.

At the turn of the century, however, there were multiple societal pressures to reorganize this model, including increased immigration, rapidly increasing industrialization, and a demand from college presidents that college preparatory courses must start before grade 8.

Only about one-third of students in public schools made it to grade 9 in the early 20th century. Several factors were blamed for the failure of students to progress to higher grades: the abrupt transition; the irrelevance of the curriculum to the everyday lives of youths; strict instruction; and the practice of retaining students.

The first junior high schools (grades 7 and 8) appeared in 1910, and their number increased rapidly.

The only scientifically-based argument for separating young teens from their younger peers relied on research on pubertal development. Early 20th-century research describing developing teens indicated that they would be best served in separate schools. Yet researchers in the late 1970s and early 1980s came to a different conclusion.

The new studies suggested that the onset of puberty is an especially poor time to begin a new phase of schooling, inasmuch as multiple, simultaneous changes (for example, the onset of puberty and school transfer) are stressful and sometimes have long-lasting negative effects. Research during the 1980s suggested that the timing of the transition to junior high school was particularly disruptive for teens.

Simmons and Blyth (*Moving into Adolescence: The Impact of Pubertal Change and School Context*) compared students across two different school configurations: grade 7 students who made the transition to junior high school and grade 7 students who remained in a K-8 school.

They found that the grade 7 students who transitioned to a new school had lower self-esteem, had more negative attitudes about school, and received lower grades. Their findings were replicated by others. In addition to the temporary transition effects, Simmons and Blyth showed that students' problems during the transition to junior high school predicted other problems during high school.

The few studies that compare schools with different grade configurations suggest that young teens do better in K-8 schools than in arrangements that require a transition to a different school. In light of this evidence and the discredited reasons for the separation of junior high from senior high, we challenge the rationale of a separate middle school.

Although the old K-8 configuration might serve students well, it is not necessarily the only option. The structure of the school that serves middle grades could remain flexible as long as the number of transitions was reduced, with changes in the size and structure of schools, curriculum, and instruction being introduced gradually.

For example, rather than going from self-contained classrooms to different teachers for all or most subjects at once, why not gradually introduce subject-matter specialists across grades 3-6?

Alternative models for middle grades education have been explored mostly in the context of traditional structures or configurations. Yet, many promising organizational features and instructional practices might be easier to implement and sustain in some types of structure than in others. For example, it may be easier to foster many of the trademark practices of middle schools within "elemiddle" schools, schools combining elementary and middle grades.

We strongly encourage evaluation of alternative models for middle grades — models that do not require multiple transitions, allow better coordination of goals across grades K-12, and can foster academic rigour as well as provide social support.

(Adapted with permission from a Rand Corporation publication: Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School. See our review on page 3.)

