

How the Junior High School Came To Be

*Success has marked
the brief history
of the junior high school.*

WHEN Indianola Junior High School of Columbus, Ohio, opened in September of 1909, it was the first school to be specifically called a junior high school. Now, 51 years later, there are 5000 schools labeled junior high schools. Another 3000 are called senior high schools. Today, less than 6000 schools remain as traditional four-year high schools in 8-4 systems. The reorganized secondary schools, that is those that deviate from a four-year high school following an eight-year elementary school, now make up 76 percent of the 24,000 secondary schools and enroll 82 percent of the eleven million secondary pupils.¹

The movement to reorganize secondary education has certainly come a long way since Charles W. Eliot first suggested the possibility of reorganization in 1888. Between that date and 1909-1910, the reorganization movement was confined primarily to the talking stage. Then the appearance of a number of new intermediate institutions moved reorganiza-

tion into the experimental stage. During the 1920's the junior high school and its partners in the reorganization movement were rapidly growing educational innovations. In the 1930's the junior high school, the senior high school, and the combination junior-senior high school became accepted members of the American school family. By the close of the 1950's the separate junior high school, followed by the separate senior high school, had become the predominant pattern of secondary school organization in the United States. Together these institutions enrolled 50 percent of the secondary school population.

The movement centering around the junior high school, though already quite successful, is still a relatively young movement. Yet the span of this intermediate institution's existence is long enough so that the history of the junior high school movement can be viewed with reasonable objectivity. And it is appropriate to give some attention to the institution's historical development, for our understanding of the present and our vision for the future are incomplete without a knowledge of how and why the junior high school came to be.

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¹ The figures given are 1959 estimates based on preliminary data as reported by the United States Office of Education in the May 1960 issue of *School Life*, p. 10-12.

Multiple Causes

As might be expected, a number of causes underlie the development and expansion of the junior high school movement. Things are seldom as simple as they seem at first glance. The glib quick answer of a pseudo-expert satisfies only those who know less. A scholar sees deeper, notes interrelationships, and only hesitantly draws conclusions. With reservation then, the factors which have helped to bring about the tremendous growth of the American junior high school can be considered.

"What is the present after all, but a growth out of the past?" asked Walt Whitman. His question with its built-in answer was well stated, for institutions and major events never spring up independent of time and place. They evolve from and are shaped by the ongoing society. The junior high school is a prime example, for it truly grew out of the times and has continued to shift with the times. The whole history of the junior high school movement is closely paralleled to the social, economic and political developments of the half-century which encompasses its life. The reader may be expecting some more spectacular statements regarding how the junior high came to be, but that is really the essence of it. The junior high school was initiated, developed and grew because a variety of factors, all of which related to the times, and existing educational theory and practice, supported it in one way or another.

The junior high school did not grow simply because college presidents in the 1890's wanted secondary schools to speed up and improve college preparation. Nor did the junior high school develop because several national committees issued influential reports which supported re-

organization proposals in the period 1892 to 1918. The junior high school did not grow because educators were seeking a solution to the appallingly high rate of drop-outs and retardation as revealed by the pioneer studies of Ayers, Strayer and Thorndike. The junior high school did not come about simply because many educators were levying criticisms on the existing system with its all-too-evident ills and shortcomings. Nor did the junior high school start because psychologists, like G. Stanley Hall, supported special institutions as being better able to cope with the "new beings" early adolescents were thought to be.

The junior high school did not grow because educators aspired to put into practice more completely new understandings of individual differences which the psychologists were clarifying through their research in the 1910's. The junior high school did not grow simply because it afforded an outlet for the strong reaction against traditional education led by noted educational philosophers. The junior high school was not caused by the fact that the growing masses of immigrants and urban dwellers required a more extensive type of citizenship education. The junior high school was not created because the many who never reached the later years of high school needed vocational training. The junior high school did not come to its current position because it was a good solution to the school building shortage caused by World War I and again by World War II.

No, the junior high school did not develop, grow, and achieve its present status because of any *one* of the enumerated factors; rather, it grew because of *all* of them. The credit for the junior high school cannot be given to Eliot, Thorndike, Hall, or any other individual.

Nor can the growth of the junior high school be written off simply because reorganization provided administrators with an expediency solution to the schoolhouse shortage problem. Many were the individuals who contributed to the development of the junior high school and many were the conditions which supported its growth. It was the interaction of the many conditions and factors which caused the successful growth of the movement.

In some instances, even the champions of the junior high school movement came from different philosophical camps. College men advocated reorganization for economy of time. Public school leaders were concerned over better meeting immediate needs and saw the junior high school as a means of doing this. Board of education members may have seen reorganization as an economy move, while teachers may have supported reorganization because it would bring about new and improved special facilities such as science laboratories.

A dominant factor, however, has undergirded the successful development of the junior high school movement over the long haul. This has been the desire of educators to provide an appropriate educational program for early adolescents. Such a desire was both an original impetus and a continuing concern. While certainly not denying the assistance of other factors in the development of junior high school education, we may note that the support of some of these factors has not been sustained. For instance, the original reason for reorganization, economy of time, was the movement's first fatality. The drop-out problem which motivated many early efforts to reorganize has largely been resolved at the junior high school level. The assistance which the junior high school received

from the guidance movement is now given to other schools as well. But the attempt to provide an effective educational program based on the nature of young adolescents remains as the basic theme song of the junior high school movement.

Chronological Coincidences

"Nine-tenths of wisdom," said Teddy Roosevelt, "is being wise in time." And while we cannot credit an institution, such as the junior high school, with wisdom, this statement may point up an important reason for the successful development of the American junior high school. Accidentally, coincidentally, and in some cases by design, the junior high school seems to have been wise in time. Its growth seems to have been assisted by many chronological coincidences. The way a variety of developments worked together to the advantage of the reorganization movement is at least a partial explanation for the notable success which the movement has enjoyed.

What if G. Stanley Hall had published his volumes on adolescence in 1925 instead of 1905? What if the school building shortage caused by World War I had come *before* the series of committee reports dealing with reorganization rather than *after*? What if the drop-out studies had been made in the 1880's rather than in 1907-1911? What if the movement to chart individual differences had come about before any mention of reorganization had been made? A number of similar questions might be posed, and probably would be equally difficult to answer with confidence. They are, perhaps, purely academic, yet they serve to point up how important the chronological convergence of numerous fac-

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This publication contains many specific suggestions for realizing substantial economies such as the following: (a) adopt and put into use a standard module; (b) develop systemwide planning; (c) determine the educational program; (d) choose a good architect. The "21 School Building Economies," serve as excellent guidelines in making value judgments about real economy. Nine concrete suggestions on how "To Get the Most for Your Money," should help in making wise decisions on bonds.

The Cost of a Schoolhouse discusses the various kinds of schools a community can build. It outlines: the best contemporary thinking on program, design and construction; how to analyze and compare school costs; how to save money through wise employment of financial resources; long-range planning of school needs and the purchase of school sites; and, future trends in school design and construction. In addition, the study traces

the evolution of the American school-house and reports on trends in school building in other lands. School boards will find this report especially useful as a guide to pinpoint for their voters exactly how their school building dollar will be spent, and why their proposed school may cost more or less than a similar school built recently in a neighboring community.

The last chapter suggests that the school built today should anticipate accommodating tomorrow's methods and content. Elementary and high school curriculum planners should find this chapter of particular interest. The EFL publication concludes with 17 observations, suggestions and warnings for those who will be responsible for the school buildings of tomorrow.

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tors was to the growth and development of the junior high school.

In summary, many factors worked together to cause the inauguration and early success of the crusade to reorganize secondary education. The original impetus for reorganization came from the colleges and was concerned with economy of time and with college preparation. Discussions about reorganization then began to broaden their base. Proposals for reorganization became linked with other school problems, such as the high rate of elimination and retardation. From psychology came further justification. The culture provided fertile soil for the seeds of reorganization whether

planted by college presidents, by public school administrators, by psychologists, or by professional educators. So the movement to reorganize secondary education, coming at a propitious time, prospered.

The junior high school may not have been all that many hoped it would be. It may never have proved itself on some counts, yet it has achieved marked success in its relatively brief history. Many new educational practices and ideas have been tested in the junior high school. More experimentation is in the offing, as glimpses of the future are beginning to come into clearer focus. The junior high school story is then an unfinished one; but its success to date augurs well for the future.

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