

WILLIAM M. ALEXANDER

Professor of Education
University of Florida, Gainesville

EMMETT L. WILLIAMS

Assistant Professor of Education
University of Florida, Gainesville

SCHOOLS FOR THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS

WHAT school organization is best for pupils in that stage of development between childhood and adolescence? Some fifty years ago, the answer was to be a new *junior high* school for grades 7, 8 and 9. This pattern spread relatively rapidly, and a six-year (or six plus kindergarten) elementary followed by a three-year junior and three-year senior high has become the prevailing school organization in the United States.

Yet while these past decades of experience with this pattern have produced many significant and lasting features, there seems today increasing disenchantment with the schools for the middle school years. Some question whether the junior high school is a bridge between elementary and high school or a vestibule to the latter; others are urging change upon the typical graded, self-contained classroom of the elementary school, especially in its upper grades.

The 6-3-3 Plan?

Certainly there is not an adequate basis in research for strict adherence to the status quo. Research on school organization does not demonstrate the clear superiority of any one organizational arrangement over all others. Anderson's review (1) of research on organization in relation to staff utilization and deployment led him to conclude that "... recent research upon which policies of staff utilization and deployment must be based, at least temporarily, is woefully inadequate." What can be concluded from a review of the literature is that existing arrangements do not seem to satisfy some criteria for a school organization and a program consistent with psychological and physiological needs of pupils and relevant to modern societal demands.

For example, there is little research evidence to support, and some reason to question, the assumption that a junior high, separate and distinct from both elementary and senior high school, is a necessity because of the unique characteristics of the age group. On the contrary side, Margaret Mead (8) argues that the grades included in junior high "were postulated on age, and not on size, strength, or stage of puberty." As a result she observes that:

They have resulted inadvertently in classifying together boys and girls when they vary most, within each sex, and between the sexes, and are least suited to a segregated social existence. Also, they have divorced them from the reassurances of association with the children like their own recent past selves and older adolescents like whom they will some day become. When a type of school that was designed to cushion the shock of change in scholastic demands has become the focus of the social pressures which were once exerted in senior high school, problems have been multiplied.

From his viewpoint as a psychiatrist, Berman (2) sees the change from elementary to junior high school as quite poorly timed for children. He declares that "in the midst of deciding who they are, they shouldn't have to waste any energy finding out where they are." His opinion is that "during the highly volatile years of eleven through thirteen or fourteen, youngsters should have a familiar, secure background in which to operate."

Dacus' (3) study of pupils in grades five through ten raises interesting questions. On the criterion measures of social, emotional, and physical maturity, and opposite-sex choices, the *least* differences were found between pupils in grades six and seven, and pupils in grades nine and ten. Yet it is between these grades that our present 6-3-3 plan divides children.

The junior high school is most often defended on the grounds of the *bridge* function. It is supposed to serve as a bridge between the relatively untroubled, relaxed world of childhood and the more rigorous, stressful, disciplined world of high school. Johnson (6) declares: "In a world in which adults expound one set of values and espouse

another, in which schooling is prolonged and economic dependence is protracted, and in which social life is largely outside the family, the value of a haven the junior high attempts to be is readily recognized" but notes that not all junior high schools have succeeded in this regard. He criticized the junior high for its tendency to imitate the senior high.

Hull (5) claims that junior high "is a poor investment," and that "it puts the unstable child at a most vulnerable period in his life in a situation more appropriate for older youth." On the other hand, it is commonly observed that today's children grow up faster in many ways. Havighurst (4) states that "... the adolescent today is more *precocious* and more *complex*. . . . He has many experiences *earlier* than his parents had these experiences." But does the present "bridge" school serve the intellectual needs of such children? Lounsbury and Marani (7) concluded from "shadow studies" in grade 8 classrooms across the country that the learning environment "was often unstimulating; there was lack of diversity in the program of required subjects; and there was little provision for individual differences among pupils."

Proposed: A Model Middle School

Along with the scholars and researchers cited, the present authors seriously question whether the currently dominant organizational arrangements for educating older children, preadolescents, and early adolescents provide optimum possibilities. New middle school organizations and programs (9) now being developed in

various communities across the United States indicate considerable interest in experimentation with patterns differing from those now characteristic of the upper elementary and junior high school years. For consideration by others interested in developing alternative models, we offer the following as one set of possibilities for a model middle school.

Guidelines

A real middle school should be designed to serve the needs of older children, preadolescents, and early adolescents. Pupils would enter the middle school at the approximate age of ten years and would progress to the upper or high school at the approximate age of fourteen. Today's children in this age bracket need freedom of movement, opportunities for independence, a voice in the running of their own affairs, the intellectual stimulation of working with different groups and with different teacher specialists.

They are eager and ready for experiences quite different from those available in the typical elementary school. On the other hand, a congenial school environment for these children should be free of the rigidity of total departmentalization, the pressures of inter-school competitions, and the tensions of older adolescent social functions that loom so large in typical junior high schools. The middle school would be planned to serve a truly transitional function from childhood to adolescence. Its organizational arrangements should foster growth from childhood dependence toward a high degree of self-sufficiency.

A middle school organization should

make a reality of the long-held ideal of individualized instruction. Every pupil would be assigned a teacher-counselor who coordinates the learner's total program throughout the middle school years in conjunction with other teachers and specialists who know him. An adequate program of diagnostic services would permit teachers to plan individual deviations from standard programs.

Pupils would be scheduled to work in special instructional centers where they may either catch up on needed skills or branch out into further exploration. Programmed instructional materials and other individually paced approaches would be utilized, and self-directed learning emphasized. Non-graded arrangements could permit students to progress at different rates and to different depths.

A middle school program should give high priority to the intellectual components of the curriculum. There should be a planned sequence of concepts and skills for the general education areas of the curriculum. This does not imply emphasis on mastery of content of a narrow range of academic subjects, but rather that every effort would be made to create a climate in which learning is exciting and rewarding. What is required is not attainment of uniform standards but that every learner be challenged to perform well at whatever level he is capable of attaining.

In such an environment, intellectual pursuits would be as respected as the social and athletic components of the program, and children would be helped to see that learning can be its own reward uncluttered by any extrinsic sys-

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tem of grades as reward or punishment. Every pupil would be scheduled in a series of planned opportunities for developing both creative and disciplined thinking.

A middle school program should place primary emphasis on skills of continued learning. Direct instruction in use of various modes of inquiry and the discovery method helps children to experience joy in learning. In all studies, continued attention would be given to the learning process itself. Teachers would guide pupils in the use of sources, teach them to formulate questions, gather information and materials, and test hypotheses. Pupils would be given increasing opportunities to assume responsibility for portions of their own learning through use of independent study plans.

A middle school should provide a rich

program of exploratory experiences. The child of middle school age needs many opportunities to explore new interests. Special interest centers, competently supervised and operated on a flexible time basis, should provide individualized instruction in each curriculum area and also in such varied activities as reading, acting, photography, ceramics, typing, personal grooming, and many others. Boy Scout merit badge and Girl Scout proficiency badge work, and other youth programs could be incorporated into the school program under the coordination of the teacher-counselor. A portion of every pupil's schedule would include exploratory experiences.

A program of health and physical education should be designed especially for boys and girls of the middle school years. Direct instruction in essential knowledge of personal hygiene would be combined with regular participation in fitness activities, heterosexual group games, and carry-over sports activities. Adequate facilities and specialized supervision should be provided for a total range of physical and health needs including corrective and remedial programs.

An emphasis on values should underline all aspects of a middle school program. A middle school should offer unique advantages for helping children to formulate personal values and standards, and to analyze and question social attitudes and group behaviors. Children of this age are approaching or undergoing physical and psychological changes which they are striving to understand. They are beginning to establish new roles for themselves which

sometimes conflict with adult expectations. They are increasingly aware of discrepancies between stated ideals and observed actions. Intellectually honest and emotionally calm exploration of these value areas with competent adult guidance would be a part of each pupil's regularly scheduled program.

The organization of a middle school would facilitate most effective use of the special competencies and interests of the teaching staff. Cooperative arrangements for teaching and guidance, special instructional center personnel, technicians and other aides, and ample supervisory staff would be utilized to enable each person to make his maximum contribution to the total program. Ample instructional planning time and in-service training opportunities would be provided for each teacher. The staff should be employed on a twelve-months contract with provisions for periodic study-leave.

The Curriculum Plan

The curriculum plan of a real middle school would consist of planned programs in three phases: Learning Skills; General Studies; and Personal Development. Every pupil would be scheduled into each of the three phases each year in school. The time requirements and the nature of the work in each phase would vary for individual pupil programs, but the general plan is seen as follows:

1. *Learning Skills Phase:* Continues and expands basic communicational and computational skills development begun at the primary school level, with increasing emphasis on use of library tools and skills of independent study. Skills for emphasis are identified and included along with content

goals in each unit of work in all General Studies areas. A remedial program of skills development is conducted in special laboratory centers.

2. *General Studies Phase:* Includes those learning experiences which give the learner a heightened awareness of his cultural heritage and those other common learnings essential to civic and economic literacy. Content would be focused on major concepts and unifying themes drawn from the areas of literature, social studies, mathematics, science, and fine arts. Some of the instruction in this phase might be in groups of up to 100 pupils.

3. *Personal Development Phase:* Includes those experiences which fulfill personal and remedial needs, permit exploration of personal interests, and promote physical and social growth; health and physical education geared to the 10-14 year-old; individ-

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Organization for Instruction

The organization for instruction would be designed to facilitate an optimum curriculum and continuous progress for every pupil. Pupils in the middle school would not be expected to progress at the same rate or to the same depth. Neither would a student be expected to be at the same graded level in all of his studies. Planning and evaluation of an individual's progress through the curriculum should be a cooperative process based on diagnostic and evaluative data and involving his homeroom teacher, other teachers who work with him, and other special personnel, with the pupil himself involved at appropriate levels. Most children would remain in the middle school for a period of four years; however, some might be ready to move into the upper or high school after three years, and some might need to remain in the middle school for a fifth year.

The basic instructional unit of a middle school should be the individual. The significant organizational arrangements can be described by analyzing the various groups and centers through which an individual student would be scheduled.

1. *Homeroom Unit*: Each pupil would be a member of a homeroom group of about 25 pupils who are in the same year in school but are heterogeneously grouped on other criteria. A homeroom teacher-counselor,

competent to give basic instruction in the General Studies area, and skilled in planning individual programs, would be assigned to each Homeroom Unit. The teacher-counselor would work out an individual program with each pupil, mandated by diagnostic and performance data and on the judgments of other teachers who also work with the pupil. The amount of time spent with the Homeroom Unit would vary with individuals, and typically decrease as a pupil moves from the first through later years in the school.

2. *Wing Unit*: A Wing Unit would combine four homeroom unit and their teachers for cooperative planning and instruction in the General Studies area. The pupils in the Wing Unit would be in the same year in school but otherwise heterogeneously grouped. Four homeroom teachers, each representing a special competence in one of the General Studies areas of language arts, social studies, science, or mathematics would meet regularly to cooperatively plan the instruction for the 100 pupils in the Wing Unit. The teachers in the Wing Unit would function as a curriculum planning committee and as a teaching team. The team may arrange for some of the instruction to be in large groups containing all of the 100 students, and some of the work to be in small groups for interactive discussions, or instruction in basic skills.

3. *Vertical Unit*: The Vertical Unit, consisting of approximately 400 pupils and 16 teachers, would provide an environment that is at once stimulating and secure, stable and flexible. The Vertical Unit (a "school within a school") gives the pupil a wider community in which to live, explore, and develop new social understandings. At the same time, this unit is small enough to promote a sense of identity and belongingness. All four year levels of the school would be represented in the Vertical Unit, and provisions for vertical acceleration through any area of the curriculum would

promote greater individualization and program flexibility. Younger students would have opportunities to work and plan with and learn from more mature ones, and the older student would have special opportunity to provide leadership within the Vertical Unit.

4. *Special Learning Centers*: The use of Special Learning Centers to serve the exploratory interests and the special and remedial needs of the middle school pupils would be a distinctive feature of the organization. Pupils would be scheduled for work in these centers on an individual basis for both short-term and long-term instruction in the Personal Development and Learning Skills portions of the curriculum. The centers should be adequately equipped and manned by special personnel competent to direct group study and individual projects. Special Learning Centers would include: library, reading laboratory, home arts, typing and writing laboratory, foreign language laboratory, arts and hobby center, music room, and physical education-recreation center. Centers would be operated on a flexible schedule and would be open to pupils after school and on Saturday.

The key to the implementation of a successful middle school program is a staff of adults of uncommon talents and abilities. The teachers must be as knowledgeable as possible in their chosen academic fields and must have training in the guidance and counseling of children of middle school age. A program of selection, recruitment, and training would be necessary to develop a staff with these special qualifications.

Obviously such a school would be expensive—perhaps costing up to half as much more per pupil than average

schools for children of the middle school years. But the loss of human potential in current educational organizations and programs for this age group may be far more costly.

If these ideas merit investigation, increased costs for their careful testing could surely be justified.

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