

# ARE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS THE ANSWER?

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THE junior high school, in my opinion, may be America's greatest educational blunder. It probably serves some children in some communities well. In others it fails perhaps in the way it is operated in a particular situation. One of its chief weaknesses is the bland assumption that anything called a junior high school is the answer to all problems of early adolescent education. Junior high schools in practice are not what people dream about when they are organizing them; besides, they are expensive. They are not easy to put together and there are always loose ends.

In the first place, a junior high school is not a standard institution. It initially was an administrative device for controlling children in large groups rather than an organized effort to improve instruction. Some are called junior high schools and are only two-year institutions. They vary greatly in operation. Some are truly middle schools instead of junior high schools. To really say much, one has to be talking about a specific school. The criticism of being too general may apply to what follows, for there are not many objective facts to go on for either side of this argument.

Tests, research, experimentation, and evaluative devices of a so-called objective design lack sufficient comprehensiveness to match subjective judgment in measuring the value of anything as comprehensive as a junior high school program.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth grades are far from appropriate devices for grouping students together. Take a look at a group of seventh graders and at a group of ninth graders separately. If they have anything in common, it is that they are boys and girls with two eyes, two arms, and two legs; but there the similarity ends. Seventh- and ninth-grade interests are not the same, and their growth and development are so far apart that they literally live in different worlds.

Many times one can observe maturing eighth-grade boys and girls completely drop their seventh-grade friends with whom they have been very chummy for several years until this physical change completely altered their interests and objectives. Maturing ninth-grade boys and girls have usually outgrown their

former seventh-grade friends, and the seventh-grade friends lose interest in them, also. To single out these youngsters and house them together in the same school appears to some to be illogical and poor educational design. Ninth-grade students have much more in common with high school students than they do with seventh graders.

A four-year high school transcript is much more meaningful than a three-year transcript of a three-year senior high school. Colleges prefer four-year transcripts.

High schools do not like to give full credit for junior high school subjects such as foreign language or typing. In fact they usually prefer not to give full credit even when the junior high school is a part of their own system.

Both high schools and colleges have much more confidence in a ninth-grade curriculum from the four-year high school. One reason for this may be that there is still no real source of training for the junior high school teacher. This makes most junior high school teachers either converted elementary teachers or high school teachers who too often are waiting for a senior high school job. This does not improve the morale of junior high school teachers or long-range thinking by the faculty.

### **Progress and Mobility**

Today's society is fast moving. Subjects that once were studied in college are now studied in high school, and the elementary school teaches subjects that once were taught in high school. The trend is toward departmentalized upper elementary grades, semi-departmentalization, or what are coming to be called middle schools, including sixth, seventh, and eighth grades with the ninth grade back in the four-year high school where it belongs. The turnover in today's mobile population results in a two-year school being unstable and losing its identity. Every year the student body is 66 percent to 75 percent new. This gives pupils little chance to develop morale or anything else of a positive nature under these conditions.

In my opinion, the current trend to departmentalize the upper grades may be good. At least, this seems to fit the development patterns of some students better. Such an arrangement necessitates only one transition instead of two between schools to be achieved, and it tends to produce an institution that is sounder administratively and educationally. The seventh grader is not left dangling. Yet we must not ever assume that such a program is any easier to organize just because it is called upper elementary or intermediate. The problems still exist.

A subject formerly taught only in high school, such as science, which is now a standard elementary school subject, justifies the specialists who are being imported into elementary teaching, and one gradual change to high school rather than two changes make the arrangement worth while. How many teachers a day should young adolescents be expected to meet, and how many students should teachers be expected to teach per day is the key question.

The competitive athletics program that develops into too big a pattern of little

high schools does not get out of hand in an elementary school setup. Such an arrangement would reduce the huge outlay for junior high gymnasiums and the whole competitive athletic show that the junior high school tries to carry. We have more important places for tax funds, and schools cannot be expected to do everything.

Anyone who has taught in a senior high school following a junior high that apes the high school knows the blasé junior high school student from the less sophisticated, or normal student who came up by way of the elementary school. It takes no great insight to spot such students immediately, but it does take a lot more know-how to get them to learn and take their schooling seriously.

The typical junior high school in the past decade has improved greatly in discipline, in curriculum, in organization, in counseling effort, and in attempting to be a responsible institution. However, it is still up against a lot of built-in problems that would not have to be overcome if we would avoid such an organizational pattern in the first place.

### **Teachers Make Schools**

It is time parents, educators, and college professors went back to the fundamental truth that fancy organizations do not make good schools for young adolescents. Good schools are made by good teachers, regardless of level or organizational pattern. After a certain point, the fewer the number of students per day the teacher meets the better the job he is able to do with the ones he does work with. What is that number? We limit educationally handicapped classes to eleven. This is recognition of the problem and would improve the quality of education in the regular classes.

Simple, uncomplex organizations give students better relations and better contacts and better understanding between student and teacher. This is what we should be working toward. This is where elementary education excels.

The complex junior high with its huge enrollment, its frequent class changes, its teachers meeting 150 students a day, and its students being jostled about among all these strangers every forty minutes all day long is too often a six- or seven-ring circus instead of an educational institution.

Many parents with whom I talk do not want their children in one of these monstrosities. "It's difficult enough," they say, "to bring up children without adding all the problems a junior high school can provide a parent to cope with in addition to his child's normal early adolescent problems."

The junior high is one of America's educational blunders that was gone into for reasons that were not educationally sound. Because the existing system is not perfect and needs improvement is no sign that whatever is devised to overcome it (in this case the junior high school) is as good as or better than the thing it replaced. Why did many school systems never make the change? Neither is it a sign that the educational program could not have been improved better within the original organizational pattern, difficult though it may be, with the same effort and resources that were put into the junior high school movement.

## A Service, Not a Product

The pattern of organization of the industrial revolution that produced a division of labor and specialized operations for the manufacturing of material things should not necessarily be applied to the design of educational services for early adolescents.

The fact is that there is mounting evidence that such an organization could possibly be all wrong because the raw materials upon which the services are applied are so unlike, so non-standard, and lack the uniformity of the raw materials for manufacturing a product. Nor can children be made uniform. We want intelligent, productive citizens, not sausages, when we complete the combined efforts of home, school and community in developing our future citizens.

We want to develop and recognize the variabilities of our future citizens. Mass production education will perhaps tend to develop the likenesses we want, but perhaps it may fail the recognition that is needed in the development of diversity. It is possible the junior high school can be made to meet this test, or any other kind of organization, if the right goals are set up to achieve it supported by adequate resources. Yet some educators still prefer to work toward the idea of taking a more gradual, less sophisticated step in the upper elementary school as a transition to the high school program. This is not an argument for holding children back, it is an argument for a little less pushing, less aping of the high school, and more appropriate tailoring of the program to the particular students.

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