



## CHANGE—AND THE JUNIOR HIGH

“MAN the barricades! Here they come again!” These may well be the sentiments of elementary school educators as they contemplate current changes in school organization. Having lost grades seven and eight to junior high school “invaders” in a previous skirmish, not a few may feel they must now muster their forces to save grades five and six from being taken over by the new “middle school.”

Imbedded in this conflict and permeating the consideration of all issues in junior high school education today are fundamental questions. These questions have been raised continually since junior high schools began more than half a century ago: “Which grade levels or ages should be included in the middle unit of the school system?” “Should the middle unit be essentially a secondary school, an elementary school, or some peculiar blend of both?” “What kind of educational program is best for young adolescents?” “What kind of teacher is needed for this age?”

At present there is much talk and not a little action leading to the establishment of the “middle school,” a new intermediate unit designed to replace the junior high school and to embrace grades 6, 7, and 8, or perhaps even grades 5 through 9. Elementary school educators are not alone in fearing that this change may represent merely another downward extension of secondary education, without taking into account the special needs and characteristics of the youngsters to be included in the newly constituted institution.

As long ago as 1894 the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies suggested that secondary education begin in grade seven.<sup>1</sup> This trend was given added impetus by the highly influential report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, released in 1918. In addition to setting forth the famous “Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education,” the Commission stated:

We . . . recommend a reorganization of the school system whereby the first six years

<sup>1</sup> National Educational Association. *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies*. New York: American Book Company, 1894. p. 45.

shall be devoted to elementary education designed to meet the needs of pupils approximately 6 to 12 years of age; and the second six years to be secondary education designed to meet the needs of pupils approximately 12 to 18 years of age.

The six years to be devoted to secondary education may well be divided into two periods which may be designated as the junior and senior periods. In the junior period emphasis should be placed upon the attempt to help the pupil explore his own aptitudes and make at least provisional choice of the kinds of work to which he shall devote himself. In the senior period emphasis should be given to training in the fields thus chosen. This distinction lies at the basis of the organization of the junior and senior high schools.

In the junior high school there should be a gradual introduction of departmental instruction, some choice of subjects under guidance, promotion by subjects, prevocational courses, and a social organization that calls forth initiative and develops the sense of personal responsibility for the welfare of the group.<sup>2</sup>

Early advocates claimed that the new junior high school would offer "a program of studies decidedly greater in scope and richness of content than that of the traditional elementary school."<sup>3</sup> Placing grades 7 and 8 in junior high would bring about "conditions for better teaching," and secure "better scholarship."<sup>4</sup> To the extent that the "secondarization" of grades 7 and 8 has, in truth, resulted in more challenging subject matter, better qualified teachers, more adequate facilities, enriched student activities programs, etc., the change has benefited the students.

### Intermediate Institution

On the other hand, placing these grades in a "junior" secondary school has led to the widely deplored tendency of some junior highs to ape the senior high in unhealthy ways. Extreme specialization of subject matter has led in some cases to an alienation of the junior high student from his teachers, a genuine loss in guidance at a time of life when he may need it most. Instruction may be highly formal and abstract, and college preparation unduly emphasized. In program, many junior high schools are indeed "vestibules molded in the same architecture as the high schools to which they open."<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Dr. Conant's two-headed *bête noire*, interscholastic athletics and marching bands, has flourished in some junior highs, not to mention formal dances and the precocious dating patterns that have alarmed many observers. Placing seventh and eighth graders in a junior high that is a mere carbon copy of an institution designed for older youth has often resulted in social activities that are "too much, too soon." Little fifth and sixth graders must not be callously

<sup>2</sup> Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. Bulletin 1918, No. 35. Washington: Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, 1918. p. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin O. Davis. *Junior High School Education*. Yonkers-on-Hudson, New York: World Book Company, 1924. p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard V. Koos. *The Junior High School*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920. p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> William M. Alexander. "The Junior High School: A Positive View." *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals* 49 (299): 279; March 1965.

abandoned to such a fate, argue those who fear that the middle school may represent yet another intrusion of secondary education patterns into the elementary school years.

Yet not all junior high schools have gone to the extremes indicated. To retain some features of the elementary school self-contained classroom, a large number of junior high schools have instituted block-time and core programs. Block-time is an antidote for extreme departmentalization, and it enables a teacher to know each student as a person, the first step toward effective guidance. Interdisciplinary team teaching programs, school-within-a-school organizations, and carefully developed homeroom guidance programs have all been used to make sure that the young junior high student is not "lost in the shuffle." Reading instruction, so crucial for academic success, is carried through grades seven, eight, and sometimes nine, either as a separate course or as part of an extended language arts or core period. A few junior high schools have even succeeded in de-emphasizing interscholastic sports and sophisticated social activities. In short, some junior high schools have retained some of the desirable features of the typical elementary school pattern. These junior high schools, not those that merely copy the senior high, may be considered the true prototypes of the emerging intermediate institution.

An institution that would truly serve the young adolescent in contemporary society will be *neither* elementary *nor* secondary in basic characteristics. It will combine the elementary school's traditional concern for the whole child with the secondary school's stress on scholarship and intellectual development. It will seek intellectual development through learning experiences in part organized around broad problems that are meaningful to students and in part through study in some depth of the recognized disciplines. It may provide this balance through some modification of the Dual Progress Plan, with an English-social studies core class for guidance and problem-centered learning paralleled by nongraded sequences taught by specialists in mathematics, science, art, and music.

Crucial to the success of such a combined approach is the development of middle school teachers whose preparation is neither exclusively secondary nor exclusively elementary in pattern, but a judicious blending of both, with specific attention to teaching in the middle school.

Junior high schools *are* changing. Yet the basic question remains the same: "What shall be the nature of education for young adolescents in today's society?" Neither changing the institution's name nor moving its grade-level brackets up or down a notch will necessarily affect the character of the education it provides. Instead, educators at all levels must seize the opportunity represented by the present state of flux to try once again to make of the intermediate unit a truly unique institution for the age group it embraces. Some of the important dimensions of this task are laid out by the contributors to this issue of *Educational Leadership*.

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