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## THE 9-10 SCHOOL:

### A NOVELTY OR A BETTER ANSWER?

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HOW DO you like your twelve years of school divided? Your choices are several: 4-4-4, 5-3-4, 8-4, 6-2-4, 7-3-2, 6-2-2-2. And each pattern of school organization has its own die-hard defenders, anxious to sell new orthodoxies to replace old ones.

In reality, if we are completely honest with ourselves and our professional colleagues, we will admit that any logical way of dividing the school years can be made to work—that each has its own advantages and disadvantages—and that the “best” answer is really an individual district matter, determined by such variables as size of school, enrollment trends, curricular offerings, student scheduling priorities, community sentiment, and personal philosophies of what constitutes quality education.

Our purpose in the present article, then, is not “to sell” the freshman-sophomore intermediate high school as one more educational panacea. Rather, with the perspective of three years of intensive research and one year of operational experience, we would like to take a dispassionate look at how the 9-10 school meets some special needs of the teen-ager, make an honest and critical appraisal of its advantages and disadvantages, and share some practical approaches we have evolved for special problems that ensue from the 2-2-2 pattern of secondary school organization.

Abington's decision to move from a 6-3-3 organization to a 6-2-2-2 was, of course, strongly influenced by the local factors alluded to above. Our school district boasted three excellent 7-9 junior high facilities and one very fine three-year high school. The high school, built in 1956 to accommodate 1800, was bulging with 2400 students in the fall of 1963. Our enrollment projections indicated that we would shortly be facing enrollments of 1000 per grade. Adding classrooms and a variety of other educational spaces to the existing high school building was considered architecturally unsound, to say nothing of the horizontal pagoda effect on aesthetics such additions would be sure to have. Furthermore, the prospect of

enrollments spiraling to 3000 in a single building suggested a bigness that we found unappealing.

Building a second three-year high school posed other kinds of problems: one school might emerge as the "status" institution; rivalries could become intense and community loyalties divided; and the likelihood of being able to offer specialized electives such as Advanced Placement courses to a senior class of 500, for example, would be much more difficult than for a class of 1000—both from the standpoint of student scheduling as well as qualified teacher availability. The more we studied organizational alternatives, the more the 6-2-2-2 pattern looked like a good answer to Abington's growing student enrollment and expanding educational program.

As our study and research continued, we discovered further advantages for the 2-2-2 or single high school concept plan. With two high schools, libraries in each school would basically be duplicates of each other. With separate 9-10 and 11-12 buildings, libraries could be more specialized; presently, in fact, the 11-12 library is partially taking on the complexion of a college freshmen facility. More effective grouping, the development of individually-tailored student schedules, the fullest use of specialized teacher talent, and the widest adaptation of individualized instruction were all relatively enhanced as a result of increasing, not the size of the school, but the number of students enrolled in one particular grade level.

### **Adolescent Needs**

The 9-10 middle school was planned and designed around people and how they learn. In particular, we believe this

arrangement gives us unique opportunities to meet certain special needs of young adolescents:

1. They need to develop a sense of independence. Many junior high schools thwart this need by placing pupils in a school situation that is too highly structured. Our 9-10 North Campus School has been able to develop a program of independent study that gives all the students many opportunities to plan for wise use of their own time, to develop interests in new fields, to get remedial help in academic areas where they are experiencing troubles, and to pursue individual projects in depth. And at the same time they are experiencing that important feeling of being on their own.

2. They need to develop leadership abilities and to gain a sense of status. Typically in the three-year high school, such a goal is attainable only for the upper classmen—usually the graduating senior. The sophomore must bide his time; his role is one of being seen without being heard. The 2-2-2 organization, on the other hand, sets up natural leadership possibilities for the student in grades 8, 10, and 12, all of whom are upper classmen.

In our new intermediate school, for example, numerous opportunities for leadership are made available through the house plan. Each grade is divided into three "houses," administrative units of ten homerooms each. Each house has its own guidance counselor, its own faculty director, its own student officers; each house produces its own assembly programs, conducts its own charity drives, has its own "varsity" teams, sponsors dances open to the entire school. In addition, students and faculty have organized over forty after-school clubs, each of which contributes in its own way to fostering opportunities for leadership development.

3. The 14- and 15-year-olds need the security of being with age-mates at a similar stage of physical development. They also

need the guidance of teachers and counselors who understand and know them. Although there are significant individual differences, 9th and 10th graders are much alike and seem to do better when together. In the junior high, the 9th grader often lords it over his younger and smaller school mates; at the same time, he is often not sufficiently mature to give 7th and 8th graders the kind of direction they need. The 10th grader in the senior high school is often the forgotten person.

Putting freshmen and sophomores together in the same school seems to make good educational sense to us. We find also that we are able to recruit teachers who combine a depth in subject knowledge with a concern and feeling for young adolescents in a way that makes them especially suited for the intermediate high school.

4. They need a sense of involvement, participation and activity. The young adolescent is characterized by an exuberance and energy that need to be channeled into constructive outlets. In planning the new 9-10 school and its schedule, we tried to create such channels. We schedule small seminar groups for each major subject, placing the student in a learning situation where meaningful participation is difficult to escape.

We built three smaller dining areas ("commons," also used for bus waiting, general study, and evening social affairs) instead of one large one. We built a little theater, seating only 350 (just big enough to hold one house), that provides an ideal setting for dramatic and musical productions. It is also an excellent room for large-group instruction—and yet perhaps paradoxically, small enough to make the worry of student control largely unnecessary.

Our point is simply that the 9-10 school is especially able to meet certain major needs of the young adolescent. In many ways its special advantages over the traditional three-year junior high school grow out of the fact that it is

something more—significantly more—than a building or enrollment expediency.

## Advantages

First, it provides a more homogeneous group of students with respect to age, physical and mental growth pattern; and such homogeneity makes it easier for faculty and administration to tailor a program to meet pupil needs.

In our social activities, for example, we knew that we had to develop a program that would especially meet the needs of young adolescents. Many of these young people want to be socially active with the opposite sex yet usually lack the necessary maturity and finesse; consequently they usually feel ill-at-ease at a high school dance—too young for dancing and yet too old for junior high games. So, with the monthly "no-dates" dances we alternated the "North Campus Canteen" a night of informal dancing, ping-pong, table games, and hootenannies—and found the awkward ninth graders enjoying themselves in the game room yet feeling that they were attending a "grown-up" dance.

Second, the 9-10 school strengthens the academic program, especially for the ninth grade. To many, the junior high atmosphere connotes merely exploration and academic transition; as part of a 2-2 high school, the ninth grader benefits from the high school's aura of academic seriousness. Seventy percent of our ninth graders are taking five majors which include one of five available foreign languages.

In addition, ninth and tenth graders have available a broad range of more than fifteen elective subjects, ranging from a course in Humanities to Intro-

duction to Power Mechanics and Metal. Large enrollments make possible the scheduling of dramatics, speech, personal typing, and journalism—to mention a few—for two periods a week with specialized facilities and faculty.

Third, the middle school provides many more opportunities for leadership. More than half of our students participate in junior varsity and varsity sports, and almost two-thirds are active in some type of club or extracurricular activity.

Throughout the entire year our students are involved in varied and enriching activities: students gave thirteen instrumental and vocal concerts, presented five plays, published fifteen issues of a school paper, and produced their own literary magazine.

A final major advantage of the 9-10 school is the beneficial effect it has on the 7-8 junior high and the 11-12 senior high. Junior high principals report that discipline problems have diminished sharply; senior high administrators feel that the 11-12 school has taken on many of the desirable characteristics of a junior college.

### **Disadvantages**

In looking candidly at the liabilities of the 9-10 school, we feel that there are two areas of disadvantage: The first stems from the same homogeneity which is also a virtue: the 9-10 school places together in the same building students who are living the most volatile of the teen-age years. The 9th and 10th graders tend to be impulsive—impulsively good and impulsively bad—and they require the kinds of teachers who know when to be flexible and when not

to yield, when to direct and when to keep hands off.

The second disadvantage is self-evident. The student makes three, instead of two, changes in six years. (Interestingly enough, some students and parents now feel that this is an advantage.) Close coordination from grades 7 through 12 is an absolute necessity in all phases of school life—record keeping, curriculum, disciplinary policies, and guidance.

Yet, weighing all factors, we at Abington are thoroughly convinced now, a year after opening our new 9-10 school, that we made a very wise decision. And perhaps we can be of service to other school districts contemplating such a change (we have received over a hundred inquiries during the past two years) by concluding with some practical answers we have developed to the problems that are likely to arise:

Most of the problems focus around the relationships of the two high school buildings: are they to be considered a single high school, or two completely separate schools? Each extreme poses certain dangers. If they are considered as only a single high school, the 9-10 unit is bound to suffer from being dominated by its senior counterpart; if they go their own separate ways completely, then unnecessary rivalries, frictions, and curricular gaps and overlaps are bound to develop.

We at Abington have tried to achieve a happy medium of unit autonomy with close interschool coordination. There have, of course, been difficulties; but our answers to the questions that follow will probably show that we have been able to work out most of them to our satisfaction.

## Questions

1. *How is the varsity sports program organized?* Our 10th graders, with few exceptions, compete as a high school junior varsity team, and ninth graders as a junior high varsity. As was indicated earlier, our ninth grade houses, three in number, have their own varsity teams which compete against each other and against junior high varsity teams from nearby schools.

2. *How are activities coordinated between the 9-10 building and the 11-12 building?* Rather than adopt a rigid policy, we try to find the best answer for each individual activity. Each school, for example, publishes its own four-page newspaper with its own staff and sponsor. But the combined eight-page issue is distributed to both schools. For some activities (such as our Affiliation-Exchange club) there is a single organization, with members and faculty sponsors from both buildings and with meetings held alternately in both schools. For some activities, (such as the Debate Club) there are dual clubs, which from time to time meet together. And, in a few cases, a club will exist at only one of the schools but will draw members from the other.

3. *How is curriculum coordination assured?* District-wide curriculum committees, under the direction of the assistant superintendent, coordinate closely the entire 7-12 program for each department. Because of these very active committees, we probably have better curriculum coordination now than we had with the 6-3-3 organization.

4. *Do guidance counselors move with the students or stay with the building?* There are heated and valid arguments on both sides of this question. We see the counselor as a vitally important member of the faculty team, who stays in his school, builds up strong faculty relationships, and plays an important part in the total instructional program. He has the same counselees for

two years and works very closely with his counterparts in the 7-8 and 11-12 buildings.

5. *How are the two buildings administered?* Each building is administratively autonomous, with its own principal and assistants. Both administrations, of course, are responsible to the superintendent and his staff, who resolve any differences that cannot be settled in open discussion.

6. *What happens to tenth graders who fail key subjects?* Summer school takes care of most failures. The 11-12 building offers one math and one science course for 10th graders; a few students—no more than five or six—take courses at both buildings.

7. *Are there three commencements?* There is only one commencement and one yearbook—at grade twelve. Eighth graders and tenth graders have final promotion assemblies, but the usual fuss attendant upon junior high graduation has been eliminated.

What we are saying, in effect, is that the 9-10 intermediate high school is neither just a passing novelty, nor an educational panacea that will make the junior high obsolete. It can, however, be a highly effective way of meeting the special needs of the young teenager in terms of curriculum offerings, leadership opportunities, social program, and extracurricular activities.

8. *How do you build school spirit for two high schools in one?* The name is perhaps the best indication of what we have tried to achieve: the 11-12 unit is called "Abington High School South Campus"; the 9-10 unit, "Abington High School North Campus." There is still one Abington High School in terms of college admissions, varsity football, school colors and cheers, and academic reputation. But there is also one very important "North Campus." This unit, through its school paper, its house organization, its ninth grade teams, its course offerings, its social activities—its own total uniqueness—has developed intense loyalties among its students.

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