

Middle School in the Making

Donald H. Eichhorn

RECENTLY I visited the Lounsberry Hollow Middle School in New Jersey. As I talked casually with students and teachers, it seemed to me that a feeling of excitement and enthusiasm permeated the entire school. One student responded to the inevitable question of how she liked her school with this brief but descriptive reply, "It is really neat." Her response seemed to sum up the feeling I have sensed among transescents and adults in so many middle schools which I have been privileged to visit throughout the nation.

It was the same feeling I experienced as I listened to a faculty team leader from the Rupert Nock Middle School in Newburyport, Massachusetts, as he told me of his joy in teaching in the middle school. It was the same feeling I received from an urban principal in Detroit, Michigan, as he described the favorable change in student and teacher attitude at the recently implemented Pelham Middle School. It occurred to me that, after many years of commitment to the belief that schools in the middle could be exciting, dynamic, and effective, this concept was beginning to come of age.

Since the early 1960's when pioneer schools in Centerville, Ohio; Barrington, Illinois; Eagle Grove, Iowa; Mt. Kisco, New York;

and Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania, suddenly emerged, there has been much discussion regarding the middle school. Many educators have described this movement as a new concept. Rather, I suggest it is a 70-year-old concept rededicated to its basic principles. Certainly, the fundamental idea that this should be a school designed for youngsters in transition from childhood to adolescence is just as accurate today as it was in the early decades of this century. Outstanding schools, whether they are junior high or middle schools, have one common element: a program uniquely designed for the transescent learner.

The middle school movement has emerged rapidly. As more and more middle schools are organized and implemented, some educators express the belief that the middle school movement is simply a convenient excuse to erect new buildings or to achieve racial balance. Others insist that concern for age characteristics is the chief factor responsible for change.

Realistically, all of these various opinions have validity. The impetus for widespread reorganization of any institution in our society rarely can be attributed to a single or even a few causal factors. The mushrooming reorganization of middle schools is no

The middle school movement shows several positive outcomes. Yet the new approach needs support from all areas of the profession.

exception. There are at least three significant forces motivating efforts of educators to re-define the function of schools in the middle.

1. There is a growing body of knowledge relating to the characteristics of boys and girls in late childhood and early adolescence that is causing a reaffirmation of the principle of uniqueness espoused by early junior high leaders. The fact that biological maturation is occurring at an earlier age adds to its impact.

2. There are significant changes in our culture such as population shifts, population mobility, the dream of racial equality, developments in transportation and communication, and the forces involved in a developing technology which are prompting a reconsideration of school building as well as organizational pattern.

3. There is a growing realization that schools in the middle have become rigid and institutionalized. A variety of developing educational concepts such as continuous learner progress, flexible schedules, nongrading, interdisciplinary curriculum, cooperative planning and teaching, and affective programs appear more likely to succeed in a revised framework.

Current Status

There is considerable difficulty in assessing status or evaluating effectiveness of a movement as complex and recent as the middle school. Limited research results have been encouraging; however, the results have not supported the excessive claims made by many advocates. Personal observation of numerous middle schools provides the impression that schools which have been carefully planned and designed by committed teachers have been quite successful; conversely, those schools hurriedly planned and implemented with little concern for age characteristics or program appear as "changes in name" only.

It is difficult to generalize in this sense; nevertheless, it is impressive to note the

growing number of successful middle schools in urban areas such as Detroit, Michigan; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Fort Worth, Texas; and Decatur, Alabama. Similarly, one can report many effective suburban middle schools exemplified by those located in Howard County, Maryland; Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania; and Jamesville-DeWitt, New York. While these are just a few examples of successful middle schools found in vastly different socioeconomic areas, I believe it does confirm the point that effective middle school education can be more than mere speculation.

Despite the paucity of statistical evidence regarding middle school effectiveness, there have been a number of positive outcomes which can be cited. In this regard, the middle school movement has:

- Prompted a reconsideration of the purpose and programs for the transescent learner
- Provided our society with a means to adjust to the pluralistic needs of its citizenry
- Enabled teachers to emphasize learners rather than structure
- Pioneered organization and learning strategies
- Caused state departments of education, universities, and the public to reassess basic positions
- Reaffirmed the concept that a unique level of education exists between the elementary and high school levels
- Provided a catalyst for change and articulation of the total K-12 program
- Established a convenient vehicle for the employment of promising instructional concepts such as open education, continuous learner progress, and nongrading
- Created opportunities for educational alternatives within the public school system
- Provided potential for future growth and development.

The middle school is "in the making." In many respects, this movement might be compared to the mercurial nature of the transescent. The movement is replete with a growing enthusiasm, interest, desire to achieve, and a quest for a favorable self-concept. In a substantive way, this move-

ment has provided a fresh opportunity for concerned educators to create appropriate programs for the transescent learner. In addition, a dynamic instructional format, which encourages diversity and change rather than standardization and rigidity, is evolving.

If the middle school movement is to achieve its great potential, there is an urgent need for support from all facets of the educational establishment. It is time for the leadership of the great associations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and all associations and agencies with a concern for middle level education to create "an interdisciplinary team" to ensure that transescents benefit from the most enlightened educational program possible. Also, there is an urgent need for teacher education institutions to develop a preparation component emphasizing emerging adolescent education. This preparation strand, if made part of an effective coalition with community, school personnel, and students, could result in a trained group of professionals dedicated to improvement of middle unit education. This cooperation is even more essential if education is to continue to develop in the sensible direction of a continuum of learning experiences rather than the past fragmented format of elementary and secondary divisions.

Vars, in an editorial in *Educational Leadership*, December 1965, offered a thoughtful admonition. His counsel is an appropriate introduction to this issue. He wrote:

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.¹

The guidance embodied in Vars' statement is still applicable today; however, much progress has been made since 1965. I believe this progress will accelerate rapidly in the next few years as a growing number of dedicated professionals are determined to create learning programs which are as exciting and dynamic as the transescents for whom they are intended.

—DONALD H. EICHHORN, Assistant Superintendent, Upper St. Clair Public Schools, Pennsylvania.

¹ Gordon F. Vars. "Change—and the Junior High School." *Educational Leadership* 23 (3): 189; December 1965.

beyond Jencks:

The Myth of Equal Schooling

by Wilma S. Longstreet

Stock No.: 17928 35 pp. \$2.00

Order from Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1201 Sixteenth Street N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036

Copyright © 1973 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.