

The Middle School in Florida: Where Are We Now?

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THE most obvious educational accomplishment in Florida in recent years has been the rapid increase in the number of schools adopting a middle school format. Ten years ago in Florida there were fewer than ten middle schools. Today the number of schools with some combination of grades 5 through 8 is nearing 150, with a 20 percent increase in 1972; and the promise is for continued growth in numbers throughout the remainder of the decade. While this rate of growth cannot continue forever, there are already as many middle schools as junior high schools. The middle school has come to stay in Florida.

One piece of evidence that the momentum is continuing is the formation of a new Florida League of Middle Schools. The League was born in September 1972, at the Third Annual Conference of Florida Middle Schools in Tampa. The League proposes, as its overall goal, to help middle schools grow more toward what they wish to become.

The tentative purposes of the League are varied. It will attempt to facilitate continuing curriculum improvement, in-service education, school planning, and other phases of middle school education. It will serve as a clearinghouse for exchange of ideas, mate-

rials, and personnel needed for middle school development. The League will assist in developing plans for evaluation of middle schools in Florida. It will help to secure and maintain support of agencies and groups in the state interested in educational improvement. Finally, the League will represent the middle schools in professional and public discussions of educational programs and problems.

Toward this end, in the first year the League will be providing a regular newsletter to all middle school teachers. The League also will sponsor an annual conference, arrange intervisitations and referrals, and provide a voice for its members on matters of educational policy at the local, state, and national levels.

Certification Now Offered

Further evidence of the dynamism of the middle school movement in Florida comes in the form of a recognition of its uniqueness by the State Department of Education. The

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State Department has designed and now offers special certification in Middle School. It has further mandated that, by 1975, teachers in Florida's middle schools must possess that special certification. The underlying logic is that if, indeed, the middle school deserves to exist as a separate entity, then something special ought to be occurring in those schools, and teachers should have special training and certification to help it happen.

Middle school teacher education is a direct result of the birth of the special certificate. This teacher education, desperately needed if the middle school is to survive, is beginning to blossom throughout the state. Both in-service and preservice efforts are beginning to emerge.

For the first time in Florida, teachers will be able to earn an entirely new certification through in-service education. Teachers may return to the university to earn the middle school certificate, but they need not do so. Each county school system with a middle school has the option of submitting a plan outlining the manner in which their teachers will be trained. At this point, the major guidelines to counties from the State Department have been that each teacher seeking in-service middle school certification must have completed at least one year of successful full-time teaching in an identified middle school, and participate in an approved county level middle school in-service program. A wide variety of county programs are developing and, to ensure some uniformity, further guidelines to the counties will probably soon be forthcoming.

The University of Florida now offers an operational Middle School Teacher Education Program that permits entry at three levels. The first level is a one-quarter "add-on" program for undergraduate students who have already completed the requirements for either an elementary or secondary certificate and wish to complement their training with middle school specialization. This post-baccalaureate add-on block is a 16 quarter-hour individualized, competency-based program focused predominantly on field experiences. Seminars and "concept" sessions continuing

throughout the term emphasize helping teachers become better team members and preparing them to deal with the growth and development needs of transcendent students.

Graduate programs at the University of Florida in Middle School Education at the master's and specialist levels are now preparing enrolled students to assume positions of leadership throughout the state and nation. Team leaders, curriculum coordinators, principals, and others are preparing to facilitate the further implementation of the middle school concept. There is little doubt that this special training and certification will add a great deal of vitality to the life of the middle schools in Florida. Effective training programs are essential to the existence of the middle school here and elsewhere.

Changes in Instruction

Visits to middle schools throughout the state easily yield evidence of the positive effects of an increased statewide emphasis on actual, pervasive, lasting, school-level program changes. One of the most encouraging changes to be found is the exciting extent to which middle schools have been able to achieve a large measure of independence from the legacy of earlier organizational patterns. Apparently, just changing the name of the school seems to legitimize these declarations of independence. The "little high school" approach has been questioned, found wanting, and is on its way out in Florida. Middle school teachers in Florida have become convinced that independence and uniqueness in program are not only advisable but crucial to the educational experience of their students.

Individualized instruction as a preferred instructional strategy has found its way, in at least some form, into virtually every middle school in the state. The use of the learning stations approach is spreading rapidly, along with the use of unipacs or learning activity packages (LAP's). Commercial and quasi-commercial instructional systems based on an individualized approach (SRA, IPI, IGE, etc.) are being adopted widely. Some

schools are experimenting with computer-managed instruction, which allows them to implement a "continuum of objectives" system involving specific learning objectives, and individual student diagnosis, prescription, and study. The emergence of quality programs in independent study for middle students can be spotted all over the state. Individualized, personalized instruction is achieving real momentum in Florida's middle schools as teachers begin to make it work.

Exploration seems to have been adopted as a central theme by most middle schools in Florida. Currently this involves an increasing flexibility, openness, and variety in the expressive or unified arts programs (home economics, industrial arts, art, music, etc.). It is beginning to mean more than this in many schools, as special interest enrichment programs spring up in every part of the state. Many special interest programs offer students daily involvement in an activity self-selected from a list of almost infinite variety. It is not unusual to see students in a single school involved in activities ranging from candlemaking or intramurals to exploratory foreign language studies and violin.¹

Teachers in Florida's middle schools are paying increased attention to the affective side of the educational process. The role of

¹ For an interesting and complete description of these programs see: Joseph Bondi, *Developing Middle Schools*. New York: MSS Publications, Inc., 1972.

the teacher as effective guide, the facilitator of the personal growth of students, is assuming a greater and greater significance when teachers come together to discuss their goals and objectives. Health and sex education, a focus on the development of group process skills, increased opportunities for students to experience success, and a greater concern for the role of emotion in the classroom are just a few of the things middle school teachers seem to want to bring to their classrooms.

Almost every middle school in the state is making an effort to design a schedule and a system of grouping which fit what teachers and students want to do, rather than the reverse. In contrast to the situation a few years ago, when the inflexible six-period day existed in every school, today's middle schools are trying out a variety of scheduling patterns which they describe as block, diagonal, modular, and so forth. A number of alternatives to the traditional system of grouping strictly by chronological age are in use, with attempts at multiage grouping achieving a minimum level of popularity among those who try it.

Team Teaching

Team teaching has become a favorite form of teacher deployment in Florida's middle schools. Teachers and principals from schools where there is no authentic attempt at teaming of some kind talk as though their schools were committing a terrible sin of



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omission. Exactly what form of teaching will emerge as the most popular one 10 years from now is still unknown, but the fact that teaming itself seems here to stay is questioned by few Florida middle school educators.

Theorists and advocates of the middle school concept in universities and county level administrators and staff members are pushing what they describe as interdisciplinary team teaching. One brand of interdisciplinary teaming practiced successfully in a number of Florida middle schools has four-person teams composed of one specialist from each of the areas of language arts, social studies, science, and math. Each specialist serves as the resource person for his particular area, doing a great deal of the planning for the teaching of that subject. Each teacher on the team, however, teaches all four of the academic subjects. Advocates of this method point to a number of advantages, including the easier correlation of subject matter areas, and an increased ability of teachers to concentrate on the student first and all else second.

Other schools tend to rely on single-discipline teams, for example, the social studies team. Those who are convinced of the merits of this brand of teaming claim that it is the best way to ensure that each academic area is taught by those who know enough about it.

As changes occur with greater frequency and impact, an interesting phenomenon is taking place in Florida's middle schools. Faculties are becoming painfully aware, in some cases, that what their written philosophy says they believe and do is not obvious in the day-to-day operation of the school. The faculties of other middle schools are discovering that the goals and objectives that went down on paper five or ten years ago no longer have any relevance to or connection with their current practices. As a result, all over the state middle school faculties are making real efforts to see that there is a congruence between what the school says it believes and what happens to kids in the school. This rethinking of goals and resultant programs promises a healthier future for education for the middle years in Florida.

What Remains To Be Done

The middle school movement in Florida is a healthy, growing, enthusiastic development. Floyd Christian, Commissioner of Education in Florida, stated in September 1972 that "Florida's experiment in middle schools is probably the most successfully innovative program undertaken by the Florida Department of Education." And so it seems; but much remains to be accomplished before educators concerned with the school lives of emerging adolescents can rest easily on their laurels.

Special middle school certification in Florida has been a great boon to the movement. New efforts in this area are needed, however. The confusing number of overlapping certificates must be reduced. The presently limited middle school certificate must be expanded to allow teachers who possess it to teach in grades 5 through 8, regardless of the name on the front of the school building.

This hoped-for expansion of the middle school certificate implies an even more necessary development. The Middle School, as a concept, must come to include all schools which are intermediate, those schools between elementary and high school. Educators concerned with this area of schooling must see to it that all schools attempting to meet the needs of transescents view themselves as helpmates rather than as rivals struggling over disputed territory. A broader certification, resulting from this kind of outlook, will help to strengthen programs for transescents by prompting teacher education programs to provide the all-important training for potential faculty.

The middle school movement in Florida is a dynamic, exciting phenomenon. Almost everyone who is participating in the improvement of educational experiences for emerging adolescents in Florida seems caught up in an enthusiasm that has been missing from this part of schooling for a long time. This observer is convinced that, if this momentum continues to grow, great progress will be made in education for the middle years of school in Florida and elsewhere. □

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