
Students, teachers, and parents work together to create, through time, a program that is integral to its middle-school clientele.

A Middle School: No Easy Way

NORMAN G. OLSON*

SCHOOLS for "middle-aged" children were new and few in Minnesota four years ago when Marshall Middle School began operation with 885 students. Fifth and sixth graders and their elementary teachers moved into two adjacent buildings occupied by seventh and eighth graders and their junior high teachers. We had a ready-made middle school on our hands and really did not know how to deal with it.

It was obvious that the traditional junior high school could not meet the needs of this age grouping. Therefore it was very necessary for the staff to do an assessment to determine the assets and liabilities of the situation. The results were:

Buildings: We had two adjacent, well-maintained buildings, one 1897 vintage and one 1935-style high school unit. There was plenty of space.

"Experts": Consultants who could answer all our questions were not available. We would need to be trailblazers.

Faculty: About 50 percent were trained and certified as elementary teachers and 50 percent as secondary teachers. There was

some apprehension about how well these teachers would work together.

We agreed that our primary goal must be to establish a learning climate that would allow every person in the school to develop a positive self-concept. This, we believed, is basic to living and learning.

Philosophy

After this goal had been established, we began to develop a philosophy so practical that it could be used daily as we struggled to put a program into action.

● *For the student:* Accept each student as unique.

1. Work toward individualizing instruction.
2. Encourage students to become more self-directed learners.
3. Develop instructional areas for large and small groups.

* *Norman G. Olson, Principal, Marshall Middle School, Marshall, Minnesota*

4. Arrange for adequate library and resource facilities for self-directed learning.

5. Consider the whole child by providing for his emotional and physical needs.

6. Abolish the traditional grading system. The learner becomes responsible for his own progress toward a goal which he has helped to set.

● *For the teacher:* Trust each other as professionals.

1. Provide the time and organization for teachers to work and plan together so that their talents might be used as fully as possible.

2. Encourage teachers to become planners and implementers rather than lecturers.

● *For the parent:* Foster closer cooperation between home and school.

1. Bring the child into the reporting procedure.

2. Provide a way for parents and teachers to communicate.

3. Keep the parents informed of goals, policy, and curriculum.

4. Encourage participation of parents through a parent council.

The Program

It is almost impossible to know hundreds of students well, yet each professional can know and keep track of 20 students. Therefore we initiated an advisor-advisee system which aided the individualized program that we had put into practice. Each faculty member was assigned 18 to 20 students (four or five from each grade level). These advisee groups stay together through four years of middle school as a relatively stable group with only four or five members gained or lost each year.

The chief task of the advisor is to build a positive, trusting relationship with each advisee. The advisor assumes responsibility for monitoring student progress, planning academic work with the student, encouraging participation in extracurricular activities, and being aware of developing interests, achievements, and problems.

The advisor also serves as the communication link between the school and the home. Formal advisor-advisee-parent conferences are scheduled every nine weeks. These are planned by the student and advisor using



Photos courtesy of the author

Small group work enables a teacher to give middle school students the individual attention they require.



These years are a time for pupils to expand their interests in music and other arts.

materials gathered from teachers in all subject areas. The student invites his parents to school and explains his progress and projected plans in each subject area.

The emphasis is on success. Very often the student who struggles academically is pleased with his accomplishments in his projects and is proud to bring grandparents, brothers, sisters, and sometimes a neighborhood friend to the conference. This evolving relationship can foster an unbelievably strong cooperative spirit among students, faculty members, and parents.

The Mini-Schools

All students are involved in curricular offerings which include: language arts, social studies, science, mathematics, physical education, health and guidance, art, music, home economics, and industrial arts.

The staff is divided into academic multidiscipline teaching teams of four teachers who are basically responsible for the math,

language arts, science, and the social studies programs for their advisees. Consequently, all teachers on the team teach mutual advisees at all grade levels. Six of these multidiscipline teams function within the school. Two teams of teachers in special areas (music, art, home economics, shop, and physical education) are scheduled to serve mini-school teams.

Each teacher is also a member of a single discipline team. Some grouping to take advantage of a particular teacher's strength is arranged, but the basic goal of this team is to plan and devise curricular experiences within the subject area. For example, learning experiences planned by all social studies teachers are available to the multidiscipline teams. Much time and energy are devoted to organizing the basic content and skills within each curriculum with enough flexibility so that students can progress through content at various rates and depths using a variety of modes of learning. Alternative forms of learning experi-

ences are essential in meeting the needs of all learners.

Process, Progress, and Problems

It was no small undertaking to meld a viable curriculum from the divergent teaching approaches of both elementary and secondary teachers. Implementing the philosophy, even though it is an uncomplicated statement, made unbelievable demands on staff time and student cooperation. The need for curriculum materials, most of which we had to put together ourselves, was an almost overwhelming problem. To compile these materials, single discipline teams were given common meeting time during the school day. It was necessary to cope with larger classes in order to accommodate these meetings. We were not without our critics during the three years this trade-off was in operation.

Single discipline teams of teachers were employed during the summer to put ideas that were found workable during the school year into final form. It took three school years of hard work and three summers of intense writing to gain enough expertise in various single discipline areas to be able to move productively to the multidiscipline teams. At that point the single-discipline curriculum became the tool that allowed the multidiscipline team to function. The school program began to achieve a good measure of its potential with the emerging maturity of the multidiscipline team.

The gathering and coordinating of teaching materials was another difficult challenge. We found much excellent material, but we were nearly swamped attempting to put it together in some form of continuous flow, to provide materials for alternate forms of learning, and to encourage continuous progress. To cope with this mass of work and materials, each major subject area developed a resource center staffed with a paraprofessional. No walls came down; we used spare classrooms, nooks, crannies, and hallways.

We continue to take first prize in the school district in the number of manila folders used and the volume of paper consumed.

A major strength in our school is a very professional faculty. Instead of being incompatible, the elementary and secondary teachers found their training backgrounds to be complementary. To keep the concern for the whole child of the elementary teacher and to add the in-depth subject matter expertise of the secondary teacher is a fine blend which has brought balance to our school philosophy and performance.

It takes communication, constant thoughtful in-service work, and continuous reflection upon the priorities set forth in the philosophy to keep this program operating smoothly. There is not much question that it would be easier and a lot less time-consuming to have a traditional junior high school or a traditional elementary school through the sixth or even through the eighth grade. However, we like what is happening to students and to faculty members in our school. Learning is exciting, fun, creative, and vital!

In conclusion, we see the advisor-advisee-parent relationship as the very heart



Emotional and physical needs play a large role in educating the whole child.



Comfortable couches, soft music, and volumes of paperbacks create a relaxed atmosphere for reading motivation and for teaching reading skills.

of the program. It represents a workable and necessary communication model. We have devised additional reinforcements to a workable communication network:

1. Student Council and its committees—meets weekly.
2. Student Advisor Council—meets weekly with administration. This group also helps to evaluate curriculum with single-discipline teams once each year.
3. Parent Council—meets monthly. One parent represents each homeroom on this council.
4. Faculty Council—meets each week. Representatives from the teaching teams research curriculum needs and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the school.
5. Single Discipline Teams—meet once a

week. These teams make curriculum and scheduling decisions.

6. Multidiscipline Teams—meet once each week. This group “staffs” individual students, evaluates progress, and determines the learning experiences needed next by the 135 students of different ages in their charge.

Marshall Middle School is not a finished, finalized program, nor did we build it as a model. However, it is working for us, and we are well on the way toward achieving the goals that we have set.

We have worked hard and learned together as a staff and probably feel more professional now than ever before. Our school is becoming less “sit down and listen to me” and more “find out and do.” Students like school and we believe we have fewer pupils who feel like academic discards. □

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