



# The Way I See It

WALTER H. YODER, JR.

## Middle School vs. Junior High Misses the Point

The middle school has been said to represent a dramatic break from the past, but its goals are actually no different from those of the junior high.

The middle school is supposed to provide a transition between elementary and secondary education, with opportunities for exploration of special student interests and development of interpersonal skills and self-concept. Similarly, the junior high was designed to provide an opportunity for transition, exploration, and development of interpersonal skills. It should, as Gruhn and Douglass stated, provide "integration, exploration, guidance, differentiation, socialization, and articulation."<sup>1</sup>

The "middle school movement," then, may be more psychological than philosophical. We might just as logically call it the "junior high movement" and reaffirm the principles of the junior high as enunciated 70 years ago.

What stands for a good program at the middle school level should stand for a good program at the elementary or high school level. Bondi and others, for instance, identified several attributes of middle school programs, such as "advisor-advisee grouping, shared decision making, strong guidance programs, and opportunities for interaction among students of differing age and physical development."<sup>2</sup> I can see nothing in those attributes that are exclusive to the

middle school; they apply to other levels as well.

Some say that children in middle schools are unique. Does that suggest that students in elementary and high schools are not also unique? The argument that the adolescent is undergoing significant social and emotional adjustments and thus needs "special" handling misses the point. While rapid physical and emotional changes do occur during the years 10 to 14, the middle school years are certainly no more or less significant than any other years in a child's development.

Eichhorn has suggested developmental age as a model for the middle school, arguing that the "focal point for this model lies in the developmental differences of transcendence rather than the qualities of sameness."<sup>3</sup> Once again we have a statement that could apply to any age student. My four-year-old is certainly much different from his four-year-old nursery school friend in educational and emotional growth, although both are the same height and weight.

Reconsidering the grade levels included in middle-level schools, however, does make sense. More than 70 years ago, when junior highs were introduced to break the 8-4, 6-6, or whatever pattern, the 7-9 configuration was probably most sound for the rate of adolescent development at that time. Today, with our society rushing along at breakneck speed and foisting adult concerns on young children at earlier and earlier stages, the 7-9 configuration is outdat-

ed. A 6-8 organization, or in some parts of the country 5-8 or 5-7, may be more appropriate. Nevertheless, adjusting grade levels should not be confused with purposes and programs.

We don't need a "middle school" any more than we need a "junior high," a high school, or an elementary school. Names have gotten in the way and, as frequently happens, names have begun to mean more than programs. Configurations more often change with shifting enrollments and building space availability than with changes in program requirements.

The principles of a sound education, regardless of whose principles they are, can be incorporated in a middle school or a junior high, or any other configuration. It is important that programs be more important than names and that commitment be made to programs rather than to the psychological ploy of a name. EL

<sup>1</sup>William Gruhn and Karl Douglass, *The Modern Junior High School* (New York: Ronald Press, 1947), pp. 59-60.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Bondi, Paul George, Robert Shockley, and Jon Wiles, "The Middle School: A Positive Change in American Education," paper presented at the ASCD Annual Conference, San Francisco, 5 March 1978.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Eichhorn, "Middle School: The Challenge of an Idea," paper presented at the ASCD Annual Conference, Houston, 20 March 1977.

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## A Response to Yoder: But We Do Need Good Middle Level Schools

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I agree with almost everything Walter Yoder writes. The middle school is no more important than any other component of the K-12 continuum. Middle school students are no more important than others, nor are they the only unique group in America's

schools. I even agree that in their philosophical origins, the junior high school and the middle school are uncommonly similar. Finally, I would be among the last to dispute, let alone bleed and die over, the issue of which grades are most appropriately grouped together in

schools for older children and early adolescents, or what the name of the school should be. Professor Yoder says very little that alarms me; there are, however, a number of unspoken implications that ought to be addressed.

For over a decade, educators concerned with middle level students and their schooling have been increasingly convinced that the age group between childhood and young adulthood is deserving of our closest attention and most careful handling. Parents, teachers, community workers, and human development schools have reached what appears to be a new national consensus on the significance of this age group. Along with children and youth of other ages, pupils between the ages of 10 or 11 and 15 are experiencing a time of life that is truly different, one that leads them on an often torturous journey from childhood to adolescence. What happens to human beings in this period is crucially important to fulfilling the promises of childhood and redeeming the possibilities of young adulthood. These are the adolescents of the space age, and what happens to them in school matters, like it or not, a great deal to all of us. Surely this is no longer a matter of debate.

Just as it is with roses, so it is with schools; the name of a school matters very little when one judges whether or not it does what we want it to do. In the last 20 years, it has become increasingly clear what effective middle level schooling is and what it is not. This is what we ought to examine.

In the community where I have lived and worked for the last decade, there is virtually no disagreement about the differences that exist between the middle schools we now have and the junior high schools that served our students prior to 1968. The majority of our educators would, I believe, state adamantly that effective schools for our pupils in grades five through eight must have an interdisciplinary organization of teachers (not team teaching) rather than subject-determined departments. We would just as vociferously state that we believe in the necessity of teacher-based guidance programs for our students. We would, further, argue that our experience has taught us that alternatives to

chronological age grouping that permit us to spend more than one year in touch with the same students are amazingly helpful. We would not apologize for offering a curriculum more exploratory than that of the elementary school and less specialized than what comes later in high school.

**“Effective middle schools provide students with more supportive structure, not less. . . .”**

I can summarize the real world differences between effective middle level schools and those that are not in a single word: structure. Effective middle level schools provide students with more supportive structure, not less, than pupils received in schools a decade or more ago, and more structure than they receive in less effective schools today. The relationship among the faculty is more structured. The teacher-student relationship is more structured. Instruction and the curriculum are more structured. Effective middle level schools recognize that, in the society we live in today, a great deal of structure that existed outside the school years ago is now absent. Families, neighborhoods, communities, and institutions are no longer what they were. Decades ago the junior high school as we knew it then worked well; those times are gone. Too many of the students we see today, for whatever reason, are not capable of functioning in the responsible, self-disciplined ways that we wish they would. At least the students in our schools are not. The school must be a different place from what it was.

Fortunately, there is good news in all of this. My experience and modest research efforts (reported elsewhere) have convinced me that, when we design schools as I have described them, the outcomes support the effort. In the past ten years, we have witnessed a significant number of positive results from our

schools with team organization, advisory groups, multi-age grouping, and exploratory curricula. We find that when schools are appropriately organized and staffed:

1. Discipline problems are dramatically lessened in both frequency and severity.
2. Both teachers and students report significantly more positive feelings about their experiences.
3. Students believe themselves to be more successful in ninth grade as a direct result of their experiences in the preceding years.
4. Parent support for the school program increases.
5. Race relationships are significantly more positive.
6. Academic achievement does not suffer.

I do not doubt that there are many effective middle level schools carrying the name junior high school, just as there are many ineffective schools labeled middle school. Just as surely, this has long since ceased to be important. What is important is that we know the students are different; we know what works with these kids; and we know if we do it well that schooling will be a more positive and productive experience for almost everyone involved.

It is time to recognize that well-intentioned junior high and middle school educators need no longer mistrust each other. What we must mistrust and reject are attitudes and practices that no longer work. We must work to more clearly understand those attitudes and practices that are proving to be more effective and install these in every school in the land that serves kids in the middle. If reorganizing the middle level schools in a district, from so-called junior high to middle schools, facilitates these changes, then move forward quickly. If the needed changes can be made with everything else in place, then by all means do so. We cannot afford to miseducate this generation. The middle school is probably the only major, humanistic, educator-inspired national innovation to survive and prosper over the last 20 years. For good reason. **EL**

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