

Middle Schools Are for Me

Balancing theory, administration, and practice, Newport News Public Schools achieved a smooth transition to middle school organization.

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To change schools significantly requires a committed administration and faculty, and to help them feel committed requires a comprehensive, long-range staff development and implementation plan. Middle school reorganizations across the country have been unsuccessful because they've ignored these requirements.

Reorganizing grade structure is inadequate. Informing only central office staff is inappropriate. Including only administrators is incomplete. Rushing a partial plan is inefficient. And failure to fully involve teachers is ludicrous. Only a comprehensive plan that balances theory, administration, and practice guarantees sustained success. This article is about just such a plan.

Background

In June 1976, the Newport News, Virginia, Public Schools Planning Council authorized a middle school task force of administrators, teachers, parents, and students to study the division's grade level structure and recommend an organization that would best serve students' needs: intellectual, social, physical, and emotional.

In its July 1977 interim feasibility study, the task force recommended a grade level structure of K-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Their recommendation maintained the intent of a 1971 U.S. District Court decision on desegregation, allowed for more efficient use of buildings



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in anticipation of declining enrollment, improved the opportunity for neighborhood stability by maintaining schools in all areas of the city, and also eliminated one school change for all pupils so that for seven years classmates and friends stayed together. Most important, their organization plan recognized the unique intellectual ability, social maturity, and physical growth of early adolescents and provided for a smooth transition from elementary to secondary school.

The task force then set up committees to study curriculum, personnel/staffing, and pupil assignment/building utilization. In December 1979 they presented their final reorganization proposals to the school board, who conducted follow-up sessions and community hearings throughout the winter and in February 1979 officially adopted the reorganization plan strongly endorsing the middle school concept.

The endorsement's program goals included: (1) mastery of basic skills; (2) application of academic concepts and knowledge; (3) development of decision-making and problem-solving skills; (4) exploration of aesthetic, leisure, career, and athletic interests; and (5) provision for extensive guidance and counseling.

After the board's endorsement and the setting of a time line for opening middle schools in September 1980, there remained the planning of staff development to help administrators and teachers move from a traditional intermediate orientation to a more child-centered middle school.

Staff Development: Philosophy and Program Goals

The Instructional Services Department, with sufficient lead time to work with administrators, teachers, and support personnel involved in reorganization, designated a middle school coordinator,

selected in 1978, to direct inservice activities and to be accountable for their effectiveness.

The coordinator and the staff identified six essential middle school components to be included in all inservice to ensure consistency and avoid gaps and duplications. These six areas included: (1) middle school philosophy and student characteristics, (2) interdisciplinary teaming, (3) flexible scheduling and grouping, (4) curriculum, (5) advisory programs, and (6) public relations.

To curb rumors normally associated with a system change, the first staff development effort was to provide specific, accurate information to principals, teachers, students, and community. The public relations coordinator designed a newspaper and television campaign. A middle school hotline was publicized, with calls answered by members of the reorganization committee.

The next step was to identify all personnel affected by the change.

Staff Development: Principals

So that principals would have opportunities to gain knowledge, assimilate changes, and suggest modifications during the planning phase, principals were selected one full year prior to opening schools. To broaden their viewpoints, however, principals were not assigned specific schools during this phase. By not being bound to specific building plans, staffs, or preconceptions, principals were less likely to reject the reorganization as impractical or unworkable.

Their inservice program consisted of six sessions corresponding to those components endorsed by instructional services. The sessions began in October 1979 and concluded in January 1980. The middle school coordinator's office conducted each eight-hour session to ensure consistency. Nine principals and

two associate principals, along with the superintendent of schools, the administrative assistant, the assistant superintendent, the director of instructional services, and the public information coordinator attended. Their participation emphasized central office commitment.

University consultants, external public school practitioners, and local school division representatives conducted the sessions. The presenters knew in advance their specific responsibilities in the information process, and their presentations were monitored with considerable attention paid to whether they covered topics thoroughly and avoided duplication.

Overview: Session one introduced middle school philosophy and discussed general needs of middle grades learners. Presenters explained priorities for setting up a program, responsibilities of administrators, and expectations for faculty. They also discussed basic characteristics of a home-based guidance program, interdisciplinary teaming, a balanced curriculum, and co-curricular exploration. Information was provided at the comprehension, application, and synthesis levels to accommodate readiness differences in attending principals.

Teaming: Session two concentrated on translating theory into practice about interdisciplinary teaming and teaching. The consultants, two middle school principals, discussed organizational patterns including two-, three-, and four-teacher teams. They discussed advantages of teaming for students and teachers, stressed the need for planning time within the school day, and emphasized the necessity for principals to be instructional leaders.

Scheduling: Session three examined flexible scheduling and grouping. A middle school principal, using theoretic-



cal and practical illustrations, explained block, rotational, and modular schedules. Inservice principals examined several sample schedules and then developed a potential master schedule most appropriate to specific buildings and needs. Several schedules begun in this session were actually implemented when schools opened.

Curriculum: Session four was about curriculum with local instructional supervisors as consultants. They represented both the core curriculum and related arts. Discussion of a middle school curriculum development model and review of core curriculum underscored the division's belief in principals as instructional leaders. The supervisors presented interdisciplinary theme units, discussed cooperative team planning, and examined related arts curricula based on student exploration.

Advisory Program: Session five looked at teacher-based guidance. Again, the consultant was a middle school administrator who emphasized the principal's role in establishing school climate, the necessity for humanistic teachers, the counselor's role in a teacher-based guidance program, and characteristics of a comprehensive counseling program.

Finale: Session six provided closure. The consultant, a principal who had just opened a middle school, reviewed the previous sessions and suggested a plan for an orderly, positive beginning, with emphasis on preparation, involvement, communication, and coordination. The principal covered implications of personnel and finance, the necessity for an advisory board, and a communication model for working with all those affected by the change.

From these sessions, principals developed expertise and assumed leadership roles as consultants. Only then were principals assigned specific schools, all of which were relocations. The rationale was that principals were more likely to broaden their perceptions and expectations if they were in a new setting with new staff.

At this time, assistant principals were named but would not be assigned to a specific school until they had completed the required inservice—for the same reasoning as with principals.

Staff Development: Assistant Principals

Principals divided into three teams and, modeling the team teaching concept, prepared four inservice sessions. These



sessions totaled 20 hours and included the same six components detailed by the middle school coordinator. In planning and conducting these sessions, principals experienced many of the potential difficulties of team teaching—dominant personalities, inability to reach consensus, multiple opinions on time and content, and incomplete tasks. By February 1980, principals and assistant principals for each middle school were selected, received staff development training, and began program planning based on specific clientele and community.

Staff Development: Teachers

After assistant principals joined the administrative consultant teams, they began to work with teachers. The teams conducted faculty meetings throughout the year to inform prospective middle school teachers of the reorganization's progress. When sufficient plans were in place, they asked teachers to identify their preferred grade level placements. Although specific building assignments were not made, teachers were given this opportunity to make a choice and thus were positive about the change.

Responses to a survey sent to all teachers in grades 6-9 and to support services personnel indicated those interested in attending middle school inservice programs. One hundred eighteen people responded. They were divided into four inservice groups that met for two hours per week for 18 weeks during the winter and spring of 1980. Completing this inservice resulted in one non-college credit toward certificate renewal. Concurrently there was a college credit course on middle school philosophy offered through a local university.

Starting dates for inservice groups were staggered to allow administrative consultant teams to meet with each group. Again they used the six-compo-

nent format with information appropriately modified. For example, consultants explained a typical middle school schedule to teachers, and the teachers participated in devising student schedules within teaching teams rather than in developing a master schedule. In the advisory program for students, the program overview focused on teachers' roles, and instructional supervisors presented the core and related arts curricula.

Along with the college course and inservice programs, a locally produced slide tape presentation, *Middle Schools Are For Me*, was shown at all intermediate and grade six and seven schools. The title of this program became the public relations slogan for promoting middle schools.

Teachers and the community learned about the reorganization through additional efforts within the school division. *Inside Lines*, the official school system newsletter, issued middle school updates throughout the year 1979-80. The winter edition of the division's community newsletter, *Interviews*, also explained the middle school plan.

Teams composed of a principal, central office administrators, and a school board member showed *Middle Schools Are For Me* and answered questions at PTA and civic and church group meetings. Three videotapes, including ASCD's *Profile of a Middle School*, were shown in each sixth and seventh grade and all intermediate schools.

All middle school principals attended the National Middle School Association Conference and other state and regional meetings. Workshops, faculty meetings, and committee assignments informed and prepared the entire system to implement the middle school concept.

These staff development efforts promoted a sound knowledge base and a sense that those involved were being

kept up-to-date on reorganization. Commitment to the positive nature of the middle school plan reached groundswell proportion as teachers became unified and enthusiastic about the new opportunities available.

Between 1976 and early 1980 the study was completed; the plan designed; board approval and support obtained; and administrators, teachers, and support staff received inservice in six essential components of middle school education. Buildings were renovated and refurbished and staff assignments were made. By June 1980, equipment and furniture were moved, and administrative teams finalized plans to open the first middle schools in Newport News.

Bombshell

After a hectic summer of final preparation, the bombshell dropped. Although the middle school plan maintained the intent of a 1971 U.S. District Court decision on desegregation, the Newport News Public School System was again taken to court. On July 23, 1980, an order was issued that the middle school plan not be instituted in September pending further hearings. Five years of planning and staff development were put on hold.

Pending that decision, materials, equipment, and personnel were returned to their prior assignments. For at least one year, the school system had to maintain enthusiasm and commitment for middle schools. For at least one year, teachers returned to a grade level and program organization that had been deemed inappropriate and somewhat obsolete—and they had to do it with conviction and effectiveness.

School staffs rallied to the occasion and spent the first semester of 1980 refocusing on the old grade level structure with new awareness of the special needs of an early adolescent. Although

some staff and community members were skeptical of a favorable court decision, staff development efforts were reinitiated. A college credit course and the noncredit inservice were again offered. Principals and instructional services staff refocused on middle schools. Faculty meetings used middle school topics as main agenda items, and curriculum was further developed and refined.

Then on November 30, 1980, the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the original U.S. District Court's decision in favor of the reorganization plan. Middle schools could officially open in August 1981. A second time, teachers were requested to report for two days additional inservice at the close of school in June 1981. At that time they were reformed of specific building assignments, given more detailed information about the structure of the programs, and asked to return two days earlier than other teaching staffs in August to receive more inservice.

Implementation

One major issue concerned instructional services personnel. Although administrators and teachers were quite knowledgeable about middle schools, translating theory into practice would be a complex matter. It was possible that middle school practitioners, faced with many adjustments and pressures, would resort to more entrenched programs and dilute the program's overall effect.

Those committed to the total program wanted to ensure that essential characteristics of middle schools were not only implemented but sustained after the initial effort. This concern resulted in a specific implementation system that included a unique team of instructional specialists in addition to the regular central office personnel. These specialists were to work directly in the middle schools with administrators



and teaching teams for the initial three years of reorganization.

Specifically they provide workshops, personalized inservice, and encouragement to new middle school staff members. They help coordinate and direct existing resources, provide direct services, and secure requested assistance and materials. Their basic purpose is to promote the middle school program.

By working with individual teams during planning time and by visiting and observing in classrooms, the specialist team helps teachers become more proficient in sharing instructional objectives and techniques, producing interdisciplinary units, diversifying schedules, and varying grouping plans for students. They also help teachers conduct productive team meetings, lead advisor/advisee sessions, discuss sensitive affective material with students, handle routine discipline problems within the team, and confer with parents more systematically and frequently.

Indicators of Success

At the end of the first year, the school system surveyed middle school teachers. Of the 152 teachers responding, only three requested new assignments. Over-

whelmingly, teachers preferred the current grade level and building assignments for 1982-83 school year.

The survey also asked teachers to discuss the strengths of the middle school program. Their responses indicate the degree of success of the reorganization and implementation process.

A majority of the teachers referred to interdisciplinary teaming as the program's greatest strength. They thought team organization provided adequate team and personal planning thus enabling teachers to provide for individual student needs. Teaming provided scheduling flexibility and allowed students to work closer to their own rates. During planning time teachers compared information on student discipline, apathy, and misbehavior and prepared interdisciplinary theme units.

The five-year staff development effort can be summed up in two statements appearing on a large number of survey sheets. The first speaks of teachers who are no longer teaching subjects to students but are teaching students about subjects. The second credits the success of middle school reorganization to highly qualified and well-prepared administrators working with teachers to make middle schools in Newport News a model program. EL

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