



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."¹

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."² 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."³ 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

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

²Joseph 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.

³Donald 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

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