Florida's reform legislation has triggered rising dropout rates and increasingly rigid middle school curriculums. The lesson is that an A+ idea for the elementary and high school may fail the middle school.
Florida has the most extensive accountability legislation of any state in the nation. Through legislation, Florida prescribes a statewide curriculum, instructing teachers what books to use, what topics to cover, and what tests to administer. Beginning with the Florida Educational Accountability Act of 1976, the legislature has provided a steady stream of laws aimed at improving student achievement and teacher and administrator performance in public schools.

Every grade level has been touched by legislation. The PREP bill (Primary Education Program) was designed to strengthen the early childhood K-3 program. Next, the legislature addressed grades 9-12 with the RAISE bill (Raise Academic Achievement in Secondary Education). Finally, through the PRIME bill (Florida Progress in Middle Childhood Education), the legislature addressed the middle (4-8) grades. Funded at a minimum level, the PRIME bill has had little impact other than to tighten up curriculum through new scope-and-sequence frameworks and to provide modest funding for some middle school pilot projects.

Florida's funding priorities are comparable to those of the 35 other states that have passed some school accountability legislation. Because reform reports have focused national attention on student performance at the end of secondary education, accountability legislation throughout the country continues to place the high school at the top of the reform agenda.

Legislation Affects All Grades
But what of other educational levels? Specifically, what are the implications of accountability legislation for the middle school? In Florida, for example, legislation aimed at the elementary and high school levels has had an equal impact on the middle grades.

The Florida PREP legislation requires a pupil progression plan for each elementary student. Upon entering kindergarten, the student is placed in a preventive (remedial), developmental (average), or enrichment (advanced) group. Kindergarten students who are evaluated as being not ready for 1st grade are held back a year in a special 'transitional' 1st grade. Students who do not pass minimum state competency tests at grades 3 and 5 are also remediated and retained if necessary. As a result of this progression, remediation, and retention policy, however, increasing numbers of students entering the middle school are one to two years older than the average age student for this grade level. In fact, results of our recent studies indicate that over one-third of middle school students have been found to be over-age.

Students in the elementary school are in fairly homogeneous developmental groups (early childhood and late childhood), and chronological age differences are relatively unimportant. But in the middle school, over-age students emerging into adolescence are physically and socially more advanced than the average-age group.

Moreover, mature adolescent students who have failed once or twice are becoming role models for younger students, resulting in an alarming increase in discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. Florida's high mobility rate (students moving between schools) and large numbers of students from broken homes, coupled with disaffected and over-age middle-grades students, pose serious problems for Florida's educators. Although pupil progression legislation may have seemed to be a good idea at the elementary school level, it has become a nightmare for the middle school.

As legislation designed to reform high school education, the RAISE bill has mandated more credits in mathematics and science, longer school days, a standardized curriculum, and increased testing. Of the 24 credits Florida requires for high school graduation, 15 are required by course name. Thirty-nine other states require 20 or less. Florida's legislation appears to assume that every student is on a college preparatory track.

Stricter Standards Raise Dropout Rate
In standardizing the high school curriculum, the legislature mandated a framework for each subject area (including music and art) with a full content outline and a series of intended learning outcomes. The curriculum framework was extended in 1985 from grades 9-12 to grades 6-12. In 1986 yearly statewide tests were mandated for each subject area.

This standardized testing program, designed to undergird a curriculum for college-bound students, has given Florida the largest percentage of dropouts (38 percent) in the nation. Florida's high school vocational enrollment has dropped dramatically, and student and teacher absences—along with student discipline problems—have in-

"Increasing numbers of elementary students entering the middle school are one to two years older than the average age for their grade level."
creased at alarming rates. When the grade point requirement of 1.5 (of 4.0) for graduation takes effect in 1987, the dropout rate is expected to soar even higher.

But what of the middle school? Because educational funding continues to be low and high school reform remains the priority area, funds formerly intended for elementary and middle schools are being diverted to sustain high school reforms. Weighted funding, which increases proportionate funding for particular grade levels or special programs within a grade level, is available for all programs in all grade levels except for the middle grades. The curriculum of the middle school is now considered a downward extension of the high school rather than an extension of the elementary school or a program with its own identity. Teachers in the middle grades are receiving increasing pressure from the high school to prepare students for the college-bound high school curriculum. Affective programs, electives, and organizational arrangements such as team teaching and interdisciplinary instruction are being eliminated. The middle school is becoming more departmentalized (as are upper elementary grades 5 and 6) and increasingly geared to a standardized curriculum and testing program.

Events in Florida are evidence that school reform at one level has serious implications for other levels. Perhaps the next great reform movement should focus on increasing funding for middle schools and providing better training and salaries for their staffs. Reforms should continue to enhance the diversity rather than conformity of middle grades curriculum and contribute to an instructional program that will meet the social, physical, and cognitive needs of students.

1. See reports such as Middle Schools in Orange County, Florida, 1984–1985 (Orange County School Board, P.O. Box 271, Orlando, Fla.) and An Assessment of Needs in Secondary Education in Manatee County, Florida Schools (Manatee School Board, 215 Manatee Ave. W., Bradenton, FL 33505).


3. For more information on the middle school as America’s foundation school, see the report of ASCD’s Working Group on the Emerging Adolescent Learner, The Middle School We Need (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1975); An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level (Reston, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1985); Jon Wiles and Joseph Bondi, Making Middle Schools Work (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, in press); see also continuing publications of the National Middle School Association (P.O. Box 14882, Columbus, OH 43214).

4. See The Essential Middle School, chapter 2, 1986, by Wiles, Bondi for compelling data about the importance of affective education and physical and social developmental programs for pre- and early adolescents. (Published by Wiles, Bondi and Associates, Inc., 213 Park Ridge, Tampa, FL 22617).

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