
How We Made the Transition from Junior High to Middle School

By maintaining a vital tension between broad participation and strong leadership from the principal, an Arizona junior high school restructured its entire instructional program.

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Amphitheater Junior High School's transformation to middle school is proof that restructuring can be painful, even when it is productive. Participative management does not ensure against this; positive results can obscure the real struggles that schools must be willing to face in order to realize a successful change.

Guskey (1986) makes a point about transitions that we should all consider: action — the actual stuff of change — usually precedes the favorable attitude we might think is the proper prerequisite to it. If experience fashions belief, then leadership, even when it is participative, should not preclude strong administrative energy and expectations.

At a time when leadership from the bottom is being widely celebrated, it is important not to lose sight of what we know about leadership from the top. In a commentary in *Education Week*, Thomson (1991) points out that "enduring findings confirm the importance of leadership at the top" to communicate vision, define purpose, and assure outcomes. The evidence is equally compelling with regard to the importance of "broad, participatory decision-making." The emerging research on the generally disap-

pointing results of site-based governance should make clear that we cannot afford to ignore leadership that comes from the bottom or the top (Malen et al. 1990).

Amphitheater Junior High illustrates what happens when there is more of both.

The Rumbblings of Change

Amphitheater began its restructuring effort just when faculty members were feeling proud of the school's accomplishments. Having once served a rural community in the Northwest area of Tucson, it had become an increasingly intra-urban school, with all the attendant problems. Even so, in 1986, it received state recognition for its achievement and programs.

But these are not complacent times. The school reform movement — and its relative, the middle school movement—were in full swing. The principal, John Ritchie, informed us that Amphitheater Junior High was to prepare to convert to a middle school. Not everyone was enamored of the idea, and it was no mean accomplishment that he managed to get the majority of this strong-minded faculty to attend a weekly three-credit course

on the middle school concept.

At the end of the course, we had, at best, a vague sense that this so-recently improved school had anything to gain from these efforts — and it looked like plenty of effort would be required. The resistance to the middle school idea — with its radical threat to the order and progress so recently lauded at this school — became palpable, especially in some corners. Proven, respected teachers weren't anxious to expend enormous energy only to satisfy the educational appetite for novelty.

In this respect, one benefit of the middle school class was the sense of inevitability it created about the coming change. Naturally enough, the initial concern was with the addition of 6th grade. Many feared that this would turn the school into a place where subject area orientation, an attractive aspect of junior high for many teachers, would be compromised. Whereas the middle school notion looks backward to the benefits of the safer, more communal environment of grade school, the junior high ethos is forward-looking, toward school as serious business. This aspect of the junior high ethos was being challenged, or at least reexamined, as was almost every other established practice in the school.

Into this unpredictable setting came a new principal, Robert Smith, whose task it was to complete the transformation to middle school. He established, from the outset, that "middle school" was not a knee-jerk response fad, but a challenge for the faculty to intelligently and comprehensively restruc-

ture the entire instructional program. Every aspect of the program was to be considered in terms of the needs of the students who made up this unique age group. The school was about to undergo a drastic change: why not take advantage of the moment by evaluating the entire instructional program?

The first thing the principal did was to redivide the responsibilities among the administrative team, so that the three of them, as a team, could focus more of their energies on monitoring and encouraging improvement in every area of concern. He formed 26 committees to examine everything from academic expectations and evaluation policy to self-esteem and the emphases of the extracurricular and athletic programs. Participation was not quite voluntary: the principal recommended membership on two committees. So into this atmosphere of subtle disgruntledness came the specter of a serious intrusion into the daily lives of teachers, who were already feeling overworked.

A Tough Year

It was a tough year for everyone. But the time spent in these committees began, in a small way at first, to create a new vision of better ways to do almost everything: test, evaluate, assign homework, schedule, remediate and integrate instruction while making school more engaging, raising expectations, and simultaneously fostering self-esteem. Teacher reflection and dialogue on such matters nourished a belief that there were in fact better ways to do things, a realization that almost any idea or strategy would be taken seriously.

The principal also began to institute some significant middle school measures. To promote a sense of community, and to ease the transition



During two-hour "block" classes, students have more time to become immersed in their work and to collaborate with classmates. This type of scheduling was one of many changes Amphitheater underwent during its transformation from junior high to middle school.

to middle school, he created schools within schools in the 7th grade. To promote curricular integration and collegiality, he gave the 7th grade teachers a common planning time. The faculty generally took these changes in stride, though a certain cynicism had to be overcome about his establishment of a daily "home base." Some real thinking went into making the structure meaningful and interactive instead of what could have easily atrophied into mere homeroom, with the banality that implied.

More Changes Ahead

During the second year, a less palatable move by the principal, and one with great portent, was the piloting of a more radical scheduling option: two-hour, rather than 55-minute, classes. For all its promise as a means of accommodating more interactive and engaging instruction, it wasn't immediately well received. Because students took each class for two hours a day, they took each subject for only two quarters, alternately. For instance, students would take math and science during the first and third

quarters, and english and social studies during the second and fourth quarters.

Although some faculty members had advocated such a change for years, that didn't make it popular with parents or with a number of teachers. The principal, however, was determined to pilot it, even if it meant he had to recruit teachers and students. Some parents thought it seemed like a remedial program. They feared that their children wouldn't retain what they learned between quarters and that they couldn't possibly sustain an interest in the same subject for such an extended period of time, even with breaks.

Enough students and teachers volunteered to make the plan float, however, even though it meant the loss of a conventional planning period. But whatever progress had been made in improving attitudes seemed threatened by this unpopular program with possible implications for the future. A strain developed between some of the teachers in the "block" program and those who resented the program's existence. An oversensitivity to this strain on the principal's part would

have kept the block program from even being piloted.

Other things were happening. At the same time, the principal expanded the team/school-within-a-school arrangement, with common planning times, to include the entire student population. Early indications from the pilot were sufficient to persuade most faculty that it was worth a try.

However halting and inconsistent in its initial stages, the arrangement established regular times every month for teachers to complement each other instructionally. To enlist parent support, and in a move that represented the first fledgling steps toward an outcomes emphasis, teachers used this time to discuss their contributions in a newsletter for parents. Today every team sends its own newsletter containing exactly what students will learn that month and how that learning will be evaluated. Each member of the administrative staff supports the efforts of two teams and monitors their progress.

From Suspicion to Support

For a while, the administrators noticed a lack of commitment to these new arrangements, an uncertainty about the benefits of working together, of observing others and being observed. In the second semester, this began to change. Teachers began to appreciate the collegiality. Formerly ambivalent teachers felt more effective than ever; once comfortable in their isolation, they were now teaming and leading inservices.

At the same time, the advantages and educational benefits of the two-hour block classes began to emerge. An instructional aide was hired to provide help and relief for teachers during the day. More important, there was a sense that far more productive

levels of learning were occurring. For many involved in the program, there was no turning back. The idea began to catch on. Some teachers who had been least enchanted were now taking a serious interest in the block program, as suspicion turned into support.

Officially a Middle School

This year Amphitheater Junior High added 6th grade and was officially rededicated as a middle school. The entire school is now on the academic block program. Today, teachers meet not monthly, but weekly, to discuss instruction and progress toward outcomes. Each Friday students attend only half-days. Although at first parents objected, the school won them over with some creative solutions to the problem of custodial care. Students whose parents want them to remain at school for the afternoon participate in recreational games or enrichment classes, such as Spanish, French, computers, and weight training. Others receive tutoring from the instructional aides. Teachers consequently have the opportunity to demonstrate the educational dividends of this additional planning time. Now, all schools in the district have extended weekly planning time.

In every department, there is evidence of more engaging learning — fewer tests and lectures; more writing, debate, and projects; more precise and authentic assessment. A record amount of interdisciplinary planning and teaching is occurring. Amphitheater Middle School students have earned higher achievement test scores. Eighth graders moved from a composite score at the 48th percentile to the 54th percentile in a two-year period. Eighth grade reading scores were especially improved, moving from the 38th to the 54th percentile

during the same period. According to a survey of teachers, they enjoy their work and are proud of their school, they feel encouraged to seek new ways to improve the instructional program, and they believe that it is the collective goals they themselves have set that drive and direct the program. All of this grew out of the seed that was planted when teachers began to talk to each other and to see more of the school and its mission than just their corner of it.

Amphitheater Middle School's restructuring reminds us that in times of change, experience does condition belief and that a certain tension among all parties involved can be productive. Shared leadership should increase power at every level and result in a greater sense of efficacy for all involved — teachers, parents, and administrators alike. We are wise to go into it with our eyes open and our attention fixed on the result: the students who will benefit from the efforts we are willing to undergo on their behalf. □

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