

Fifth Grade in the Middle School? Yes!

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As a former principal of a 5-8 middle school, my experience has shown me that it is appropriate that fifth grade be included in the middle school program. Programming for fifth grade students can provide an opportunity which satisfies both student developmental needs and the need of the school to provide transition from one learning setting to another. Compton (1990) states that "the failure to provide for the in-between age in the elementary school is not so much because of the theory of its approach as its practice" (p. 37).

Appropriately planning for the inclusion of fifth grade students in the middle school setting can assure that recognition of their uniqueness occurs. Therefore, before the decision to move fifth grade to the middle school is made, questions need to be answered by decision-makers:

1. What effect will the movement of the fifth grade into the middle school have on the elementary school?
2. What programming and services can the middle school provide students that are not currently being provided in the elementary school?
3. What programming and services currently provided for these students in the elementary school can be adapted appropriately for the middle school program?
4. What special services need to be considered that appropriately can assist the fifth grade student in assimilating into the middle school program?
5. What considerations need to be made for the physical placement of the fifth grade in the middle school building? What changes need to occur in facility arrangements?
6. What will be the new structure of the middle school so that resources can be appropriately organized and allocated?
7. How will the plan for developmental programming for the 5-8 middle school occur to assure that its components are interrelated and interdependent, but yet uniqueness is supported?
8. What needs to be done to assure agreement and commitment of the middle school stakeholders for the change?
9. What redefinition of roles needs to occur due to changing responsibilities? How will the roles of counselors, principals, and others change due to the movement of fifth graders to the middle school?
10. How will parental concerns over the decision to move fifth grade to the middle school be handled?



Answers to these questions can establish a basis for the fifth grade transition from elementary to middle school. Furthermore, these can serve as the frame within which a rationale can be developed; specifically, one which illustrates the benefits of the transition for students, teachers, and parents.

The rationale should address the need for program change in terms of developmental preparation for emerging adulthood by these students. Beginning with an examination of where these students are now and where they have been provides information that can assist in determining where these students should be going. Building an understanding of the nature of the fifth grader and his or her needs serves as a basis for planning educationally the curricular and organizational changes that a move of this type will require.

A response to questions raised about the functional differences between the fifth grade in the elementary setting and inclusion in the middle school must be prepared:

1. How will students be taught? How should they?
2. How will students be graded? How should they?
3. How will students be included in the total life of the middle school? To what degree will they be involved?
4. Are fifth grade students less accountable than sixth graders?
5. How essential will multi-age grouping be to the fifth grader? In what instances would multi-grade grouping occur? Why?
6. How essential is interdisciplinary learning to the fifth grader? In what instances would interdisciplinary learning occur? On what basis?
7. How essential will advisement/guidance be for the fifth grade student? Why? What would be its purpose? Content?
8. What will be the involvement of fifth grade students in extracurricular activities? Should they be involved? Why? Why not? How/will the athletic program of the middle school be restructured to involve fifth grade students? On what basis will this take place?
9. Will fifth graders have recess?
10. What effect will fifth grade have on special programs in the middle school? Gifted and talented? Special education?
11. What effect will occur on the reading program of fifth grade students when they move to the middle school? Why?



12. What effect will fifth graders have on the special areas of instruction in the middle school? Music? Art? Others?
13. How will fourth grade students be prepared to effectively cope with the new setting in the middle school?
14. What will be done to assure, inform parents about the middle school program of their fifth grader?

When preparing the rationale, decision makers must be aware of questions raised by teachers regarding their roles and the curriculum for which they will be held accountable.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER

1. What will be my role as a fifth grade teacher in the middle school? How will become part of the life of the school? What will be expected of me in my new role? Will there be new aspects of my role that I need to learn? If so, how will I learn and practice them?
2. How essential will teacher teaming be to the fifth grade? Why? How does it fit into the program? How will I be trained for this? What do I give up when I am part of a team?
3. How are decisions made in the middle school that affect me and my students? Will this change when fifth grade enters the middle school? If so, how? Does this process differ from grade to grade? If so, how? Why?
4. How will fifth grade teachers be involved in program, curriculum, and staff development?
5. What methods are used to report pupil progress? How do they differ from the elementary school? Who will show me how it is done? What is expected?

CURRICULUM

1. To what degree will competition be encouraged? What role does competition play in programming? With students?
2. With fifth grade in the building, what will be the special focus of their program? How is this focus related to the total program of the middle school? Why?
3. What can the middle school program learn from the elementary school? Why could this be important? How could this benefit the middle school?
4. What philosophical differences exist between a 5-8 middle school and a 6-8 middle school? How can these differences be resolved?
5. How will the guidance/advisement program be organized to include fifth grade students? What will be its program components? Why? How will this program change? On what basis?



Specifically addressing six areas which focus on the uniqueness of the middle school and addressing their impact on the fifth grade student and teacher will strengthen the rationale. These areas are: physical development of students, social development of students, individual learning needs, guidance services, developmental nature of middle school programming, and teachers.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS

Since most elementary schools rely heavily on recess time or one or two brief physical education periods weekly to provide opportunities for physical activity for the fifth grade student, the fifth grader in the middle school can benefit from daily opportunities for physical activities particularly if these are organized and instructionally focused on the physical development of the child.

Physically, ten year olds are beginning to grow. Those physical activities which are structured and focused on helping these students understand what is happening in their body, help them develop control of it, and which “fine-tune” their motor skills should be determined. Appropriately planned opportunities for physical activities can help them gain a sense of who they are within a body that is changing. They can begin to understand the “why” of their awkwardness, inability to control their body movements, and learn to accept themselves, therefore supporting the development of a more positive view of the individual in their body. Within the middle school, these students can then participate in activities which support physical skill development without an emphasis on competition.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS

Moving the fifth grade student into a setting in which cooperation is a guiding tenet and within which cooperation is modeled by a team of teachers, assists them in learning social skills, usable with peers and other adults. Havighurst (1990) has noted that:

From the fifth grade on, boys and girls are very much concerned with their abilities to get along with their age-mates in the peer group. They form teams, committees, and clubs and are very much aware of the personalities of people at their age. This is the time for the development of a democratic social relationship, gained by working out the rules of playing and living with one's equals. The middle school is better for this than one in which the 10-11-year-olds are associating with younger children. (p. 29).

Since this time is one in which they are becoming concerned with the feelings of their peers, the environment of the middle school can be viewed as a source of opportunities upon which students can build and support their desire to relate to and interact with peers.

Secondly, personal experience has demonstrated that the similarity of the social needs of fifth and sixth grade students in a middle school can be used advantageously in the school program. It can serve as a basis for planning social activities which are uniquely focused on their social needs, separate from the boy-girl social functions of the seventh and eighth grade. Fifth and sixth grade students enjoy social activities which do not focus on the need to pair up. They like physical activity but quiet times; after-school fun times which include popcorn and movies, bingo, swimming, volleyball are appreciated. By differentiating the types of social activities these students will participate in, the school demonstrates that they are special and unique.



INDIVIDUAL LEARNING NEEDS OF STUDENTS

In the elementary school, one teacher typically outlines the daily and weekly learning schedule and its content. The learning setting in middle school has distinct advantages for student learning. Through the efforts of a team of teachers, students can be grouped and regrouped based on areas of expertise or interest of the members of the team.

The opportunities for remediation can be shared among the members. Opportunities for accelerated learning by individual students can be planned and implemented. I have observed fifth grade students identified for math acceleration successfully complete geometry in the eighth grade. I have seen students requiring remediation make sharp improvement. In each situation, these learning opportunities resulted from the shared efforts of a teaching team. Teacher teams can plan and implement curriculum extensions as well as re-teaching activities. Developing interdisciplinary units which provide students with opportunities for multiple, integrated learning opportunities are also possible in this setting.

GUIDANCE SERVICES

Typically, fifth grade students in the elementary school do not have access to a guidance counselor. When I was a middle school principal, it was not unusual for either the elementary principal or a teacher to ask for assistance from the guidance counselor in the resolution of a problem with a student, the home, or the parent. A major advantage for fifth grade students when included in the middle school is the opportunity for them to participate in and have access to a guidance program and its logical extension of advisement. Epstein and Maclver (1990) support its importance. "Strong programs of homeroom and advisory activities to students in middle grades affect other aspects of the school program and student success in school" (Epstein & Maclver, 1990, p.36).

An appropriately planned guidance program which includes the advisement process can assist fifth grade students to learn to deal with issues in their social environment, their classroom behavior, and learning. The importance of the role that properly trained individuals can play in the lives of the students should be stressed. Fifth grade students are very aware of the world around them. They feel its pressures. The life they experience outside the school, their developing bodies, raise questions in their minds that demand answers. Because they are not yet self-conscious about asking questions and are open to seeking answers, guidance for personal growth is needed.

DEVELOPMENTAL NATURE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Through its program, the developmental nature of the middle school can be truly demonstrated when fifth grade is included. Differentiating program purpose grade by grade can support students in the development of social, physical, and intellectual skills as they progress in the setting. From fifth grade with its elementary focus to eighth grade with its subject matter/pre-high school preparation, four years would be available within which programs could be organized.



TEACHERS

Removing the elementary teacher from the isolation of a single classroom into one where they will become members of a teaching team has distinct advantages. Each individual can build on an area of personal expertise or interest while receiving support from other members of the team. Through a team effort, greater flexibility in planning learning activities can be achieved. Given ownership of the available learning time, the team can plan its use, grouping of students, and types of activities. Variations in the structure of the classroom setting through directed learning time for students, interdisciplinary learning activities, and independent study can be supported.

Teacher teams and the cooperation implied by membership, reduces isolation and can provide students with a greater variety of learning opportunities and people contact. An effective teaching team, united in their concerns for students, focuses on what is best for their learning, and uses multiple talents, skills, and resources to this end.

SUMMARY

A middle school which includes fifth grade students can advantageously:

1. Improve the “window” of opportunity for developmental middle school programming.
2. Provide a logical break in program by planning activities for fifth and sixth grade different from those for seventh and eighth grade.
3. Serve as a bridge between elementary school and the high school in a setting where a balanced approach to activities supports student acquisition of social skills, and ownership of learning.
4. Support cross-grade level learning activities that provide opportunities for student remediation and acceleration.
5. Break down student tracking patterns used in the elementary school.
6. Encourage professional skill development of teachers through membership in a teaching team.
7. Introduce students to appropriate physical skill development which benefits them personally, socially, and physically.
8. Provide specialized guidance services which assist in social skill development.
9. Create an environment that will support continued student interest in and liking of school.
10. Provide additional time to build parental support for middle school programming and intent while helping them prepare for the child's future.

Building a rationale for moving the fifth grade to the middle school from the elementary is only the beginning of the transition process.



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