

# Grade Organization Trends

America's middle schools in the new century: Status and progress



*C. K. McEwin, T. S. Dickinson & D. M. Jenkins*

School districts throughout the nation have continued to move from a two-tier (e.g., K-8, 9-12) to a three-tier (e.g., K-5, 6-8, 9-12) organizational plan. There is widespread consensus that young adolescents enrolled in the middle grades need and deserve schools devoted exclusively to their education and welfare. With the exception of a minority of school districts, the overwhelming trend in school organization has been toward separately organized middle schools containing grades 5-8 and 6-8. As shown in Table 1, the number of grades 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools has steadily increased since the 1970s.

The most significant change in the grade organization of middle schools has been the dramatic decline of grades 7-9 junior high schools. For example, there were 4,711 public junior high schools in 1970 and only 632 by 2001 (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Market Data Retrieval, 2001). This decline has resulted from many factors that are reflected in the literature and not discussed here (George & Alexander, 2003). However, it is certain that the overwhelming majority of educators and other stakeholders no longer view the junior high school as a viable choice for the education of young adolescents.

The number of grades 7-8 middle schools has also decreased in the last decade. This trend is, at least partially, the result of school districts having initially moved ninth grades to high schools with long-range plans to move sixth grades to middle schools whenever circumstances permitted. In many instances, this movement of sixth grade to the middle schools took several years since the plan often included new construction and/or major reorganizations of school districts.

The trend away from grades 7-8 middle schools is also likely due, in part, to the recognition of the importance of avoiding two-grade schools whenever possible. One problem with two-grade schools is that students attending those schools attend three different schools and make two transitions from one school to another in a period of less than four calendar years. It is important to recognize, however, that the barriers inherent in having two-grade middle schools can and have been overcome by many such schools across the nation.

Decreases in the number of grades 7-9, 7-8, and K-8 schools have been paralleled by increasing numbers of grades 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Market Data Retrieval, 2001). Data from a recent national survey of 1,423 middle and junior high school principals also reflect the support of educators for grades 6-8 middle schools. When these administrators were asked their opinion about the ideal grade organization for middle schools, only 3% favored the grades 7-9 junior high school plan. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the principals responding to this the survey believed that grades 6-8 middle school best served young adolescents (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002, p.12). Principals responding to the study were also asked their opinions about the most developmentally responsive district pattern. Sixty-two percent (62%) of all respondents indicated that K-5, 6-8, 9-12 was the best plan. An additional 14% favored the K-4, 5-8, 9-12 plan. The two district level plans respondents considered the least developmentally responsive were K-8, 9-12 (1%), and K-12 (0%) (p.13).



The view that K-8 schools are considered one of the least appropriate grade organizations for the education of young adolescents is reflected in the decreasing number of these schools over the last several decades. For example, there were 5,552 Pre K/K-8 schools in 1988 and only 4,332 in 2001 (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Market Data Retrieval, 2001). This trend may be surprising to some because of the highly publicized reorganization of several districts from middle schools to the K-8, 9-12 plan (Harrington-Lueker, 2001).

### CONCLUSIONS

*The vast majority of the school districts in the nation continue to organize schools into the three-tier organizational plan. The most common district organizational plan is grades K-5, 6-8, 9-12. This plan, along with the K-4, 5-8, and 9-12 plan, receives wide support from those responsible for the education of young adolescents. Significant decreases in the numbers of grades 7-9 junior high schools as well as less dramatic decreases in grades 7-8 middle school and the grades K-8 elementary school have occurred. The premise that young adolescents need and deserve a school devoted exclusively to their education and welfare is widely accepted by educators, policy makers, parents, and other stakeholders across the nation.*

### RECOMMENDATIONS

*Grade organization decisions should be driven by the developmental characteristics, needs, and interests of young adolescents rather than by expediency. When possible, middle schools should house grades 5-8 or 6-8. These grade levels should be included because they are the grades in which young adolescents are typically enrolled. Placing these youth in schools that focus directly and exclusively on their needs and interests increases the chance that they will be more successful learners during a challenging time of their development.*

*Having young adolescents in a school designed exclusively for them allows all professionals at the school to focus directly and fully on providing the best learning opportunities possible. Educators in separately organized middle schools do not have to divide their energies between two or more developmental age groups (e.g., young children and young adolescents in grades K-8 elementary schools).*

*When separately organized middle schools are not possible, steps should be taken to establish “middle schools within schools” so that programs and practices that benefit young adolescents can be implemented to the fullest extent possible.*

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