Re-examining Middle School Effects: What the Research Says

What kinds of schools are best suited to the needs of children and adolescents? How should the grades of primary and secondary schools be configured to best serve the needs of students? These questions have been the focus of generations of U.S. educators, administrators, and policymakers. The numerous configurations of grades that can be found in schools across the U.S. attest to educators’ desires to best meet the needs of children and adolescents—as well as disappointment in the effects these forms have had.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the history of efforts to educate the middle grades (grades 5–9). As John Lounsbury writes, the middle grades period is the “longest-running, most extensive educational reform movement in the United States.” Although junior highs and, later, middle schools dominated the landscape for most of the middle and late 20th century, the current trend is for districts to disband their middle schools and create smaller school structures—typically K-8 schools—for students in the middle grades. In districts across the United States, including some of the nation’s largest districts in Baltimore, Cleveland, New York City, and Philadelphia, reforms are creating K-8 schools to educate students of the middle grades.

There are solid theoretical reasons that underlie this change in policy: Students perform better in smaller, more intimate environments; and teachers are less likely to know students personally and take an interest in their well-being in middle schools. Other scholars have argued that the characteristics of the middle school environment are inappropriate for children of middle grades’ age. However, there has not been a corresponding examination of the potential benefits of middle schools, such as those of economies of scale. Moreover, for the most part, previous research on middle schools has made comparative arguments in the absence of comparative data. That is, many of the arguments about the shortcomings of middle schools have been made absent compared to any other schooling form.

Directly comparing outcomes for students in different types of schools for the middle grade has been a question of great interest for me and I recently published research on the topic, using data from a unique study of eighth graders in the Philadelphia public schools. The Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study interviewed public school students in that city and their parents at multiple points in time, beginning in the summer of 1996. In that year, more than 1,500 students were interviewed about their experiences in eighth grade.

Philadelphia offered a unique setting to conduct this research. At the time these data were collected, the School District of Philadelphia had roughly equal numbers of middle schools and K-8 schools, though a plan was underway to convert the district’s middle schools to K-8 schools. Thus, Philadelphia offered the opportunity to examine how eighth-grade students in one large district fared in different types of eighth-grade schools.

In our analysis, we examined a set of academic and behavioral outcomes for a group of randomly chosen eighth graders. Each of the students in our analysis attended a public Philadelphia eighth-grade school, and our analysis explicitly compared outcomes for students who attended middle schools with those attending K-8 schools. Through statistical techniques, we controlled for individual and family-level factors related to the outcomes to better estimate the effect of attending a middle school.

Surprisingly, our conclusions indicated few significant differences between students’ eighth-grade outcomes by the type of school attended. Grades were no different between middle school students and K-8 students, nor were the chances of receiving an F as the final grade for a course, of having a high number of absences, or of being suspended. We found differences in only two of the outcomes we examined.

First, middle school students have lower self-esteem, net of other factors, than do students in K-8 schools. This difference in levels of self-esteem by type of eighth-grade school has also been reported by other studies, such as Simmons and Blyth’s (1987) pathbreaking study, “Moving Into Adolescence.” Second, eighth graders in middle schools were more likely to report...
being threatened at school than those in K-8 schools, though with our data we cannot say more about the particular sources of perceived threat.

These findings call into question whether current policy efforts to convert middle schools to smaller schools will have the intended benefits for students. Most of the policy arguments promoting the conversion of middle schools focus on the benefits to student performance in school. In my analysis, I find no difference in performance by school type. Although much has been made about middle schools’ harmful impact on students, I find little effect.

It is not my argument that schooling form and structure has no effect on children’s and adolescents’ performance in school; there are a number of ways that features of the school environment influence students. But a policy that focuses on changing the span of grades within a particular school building is unlikely to have a substantial impact on students’ academic and behavioral outcomes.

Similarly, I do not wish to argue that the middle grades of schooling are not difficult ones for students. They clearly are. However, it is my argument that the difficulties that students experience in middle school are strikingly similar to those experienced by students in other schooling forms.

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