here is no question that middle school is currently the king, the overwhelming choice for middle level education. This favored grade configuration is coming under question, however, particularly in urban districts. Are middle schools about to go the way of their once-dominant precursor, the junior high school? A headline in the *Wall Street Journal* last year read, “Middle School Goes Out of Fashion: Amid Evidence Kids Struggle With Move to Junior High, Districts Shift to K–8 Model” (Chaker, 2005, p. D1).

For some time, the junior high was dominant. In 1971, the traditional grades 7–9 junior high school made up 45% of the 10,445 middle level schools in the United States, and schools with the grades 7–8 structure made up another 24%. Meanwhile, 16% of schools had a grades 6–8 configuration, and 7% were grades 5–8 schools. In 2004, the extinction of the junior high was almost complete: of the 14,107 middle level schools in the United States, only 4% had a grades 7–9 configuration and 16% had a grades 7–8 structure, but 61% of schools had adopted the favored middle school structure of grades 6–8, and 10% had a grades 5–8 configuration (Middle Level Leadership Center, 2005a, 2005b).

**History of Grade-Level Configuration**

Early U.S. schools were typically small facilities with one teacher teaching about 30 elementary students. In the 19th century, a two-tier structure developed, most often consisting of eight years of elementary school followed by four years of high school, but a six-and-six structure was favored because it facilitated students’ movement into the workforce.

Twentieth century child labor laws meant that more children received secondary education, which resulted in the rise of the junior high school, which was patterned after the high school. It also became evident that larger schools in central locations were better equipped to educate students, resulting in the graded K–8 school. In 1920, 80% of all high school graduates had attended a K–8 school. Few students attended high school, and when they did, it was often in an expanded K–12 facility. After World War I, schools consolidated to accommodate larger student bodies and became too large to serve all students grades K–12. Soon grade spans began to be dictated by choice or political and administrative considerations, such as building costs, enrollment trends, and
Middle level grade configurations have a long history in U.S. public schools, but little research has been done and the results are not conclusive. Although the grade span is often the focus of discussions about the middle level, its philosophy and practices are what’s important.

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Research on Grade-Level Configuration

The Wall Street Journal recently reported, “A growing body of evidence is showing that preteen students do better when they can remain in their familiar elementary schools for longer—with better grades and fewer disciplinary problems than their middle school peers” (Chaker, 2005, p. D1). But little experimental research exists on the effects of grade-level organization; an optimal configuration has not been identified. Some small-scale studies have been carried out by school districts to determine their own direction in configuring their schools, but much of that literature is anecdotal or qualitative.

The research studies that do exist, however, seem to consistently indicate that student achievement is higher in the middle grades for students in expanded elementary schools as opposed to those in middle school or junior high school. A limited number of studies address the relationship between grade configuration and self-perception and self-esteem, but they favor schools with a greater grade span.

According to Paglin and Fager (1997), “Very little research attempts the more difficult task of determining if a cause-and-effect relationship exists between grade configuration and academic achievement, while controlling for other factors such as school size, student socioeconomic status, teacher experience and so on” (p. 9). Coladarci and Hancock (2003) counsel caution when drawing firm conclusions because there are just not enough studies. Other researchers agree that the number of studies is limited and not conclusive enough to determine policy (Pardini, 2002).

distance from school. By 1980, 80% of students attended an elementary school, a three-year junior high, and a three-year high school (Alexander & McEwin, 1989).

Interestingly, a new trend in the early 21st century may be a movement back to the K–8, 9–12 structure, slightly modified to include preK. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005a, 2005b), the number of preK–8, K–8, and 1–8 schools increased from 4,508 in 1994–95 to 5,327 in 2001–02. But the number of schools with some combination of grades 4–8 increased by an even greater degree—from 9,954 to 11,983—over the same time period.
A Change in the Air

Many districts are changing or considering a reorganization of their grade structures back to K–8. DeJong and Craig (2002) list the following reasons that districts are doing so:

- To foster greater articulation of curriculum
- To cause fewer transitions for students
- To keep students in neighborhood schools
- To reduce transportation costs
- To improve safety
- To accommodate declining enrollment.

The researchers also report a resurgence of the K–12 school in rural areas that have declining enrollment. In K–8 and K–12 schools, steps are usually taken to segregate age groups using a schools-within-schools model that shares core facilities.

Although there was a rapid and almost complete movement from junior high schools to middle schools beginning in the 1960s, many of those schools merely changed their grade configurations without making any significant changes to their programs, practices, and curricula. That is, they became middle schools in name only. In 1987, the Council on Adolescent Development established the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents to report on the status of education for 10- to 15-year-old children and to make recommendations for improvement. What they found was a mismatch between the needs of the students and the structure and practices of a majority of the schools that provide education for 10- to 15-year-old students. In 1989, the task force presented *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

*Turning Points* relied on the best practices and research available to propose radical changes to the way young adolescents were being educated. The report proposed the following essential principles for improving middle grades education:

- Large middle grades schools are divided into smaller communities for learning.
- Middle grades schools teach a core of common knowledge to all students.
- Middle grades schools are organized to ensure the success of all students.
- Teachers and principals have the major responsibility and power to make decisions about young adolescents’ schooling.
- Middle school grades are staffed by teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents.
- Schools promote good health; the education and health of young adolescents are inextricably linked.
- Families are allied with school staff through mutual respect, trust, and communication.
- Schools and communities are partners in educating young adolescents. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 2)

Felner et. al. (2004) studied 1,500 students and 900 teachers in schools rated according to their implementation of the recommendations found in *Turning Points*. They found greater student achievement and better student outcomes in behavior and social factors in schools that had a greater degree of implementation compared to the more traditional junior highs.

According the National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2003):

Successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that includes:

- Educators who value working with young adolescents and are prepared to do so
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- An adult advocate for every student
- School-initiated family and community partnerships.

Therefore, successful schools for young adolescents provide:

- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to diversity
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
• Schoolwide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
• Multifaceted guidance and support services (p. 7).

David Hough (2005), the director of the Institute for School Improvement at Southwest Missouri State University, is credited with coining the term "elemiddle school" more than 15 years ago. Elemiddles are K–8 and preK–8 schools that are implementing best middle level practices in the upper grades. In other words, just as a grades 6–8 school may be a middle school in name only, adding grades 6, 7, and 8 to an elementary does not automatically make an elemiddle. It is Hough's belief that "schools more fully implementing the middle-level concept are the ones outperforming those that are not" (p. 2). He asserts that the "K–8 elemiddles are the ones buying into this philosophy most fully and completely, and that's why their test scores are higher, their attendance rates improved, discipline referrals reduced and dropout rates lowered" (pp. 2–3). Hough draws on his 15 years of research to conclude that "bona fide elemiddle schools adhere to the middle-level philosophy to a greater degree than any other school type" (p. 4).

Hough (2003) believes that elemiddles are supported by many districts because they are more nurturing and child centered, are staffed by elementary or middle certified teachers who are perceived to be more committed than their secondary school peers, have higher levels of parent involvement, are usually smaller in size, and eliminate one school transition.

In Defense of Middle Schools

The renewed interest in K–8 schools prompted Sue Swaim, executive director of NMSA, to post an open letter in favor of the middle school configuration on the NMSA Web site (Swaim, 2005). She reported that in a national survey of K–8 and 6–8 administrators by McEwin, Dickinson, and Jacobson, the majority favored the middle school as "the best organizational structure for young adolescents" (p. 1). Only 16% of K–8 administrators favored K–8 schools and 84% favored the 5–8 or 6–8 configuration for the following reasons:

• Students in grades 5–8 have physical, intellectual, and social needs that are quite different from those of students in elementary grades
• Elementary and middle school teachers have distinctive educational philosophies and practices that don't necessarily work well in both settings
• A K–8 structure is less likely to help middle level students prepare for high school (p. 1).

Swaim believes that the rush to dismantle middle schools too often occurs "because it's an inexpensive, highly visible action that temporarily masks problems and distracts the community and policymakers from dealing with the real issues in America's schools" (p. 2). Swaim has indicated that there is strong evidence that supports the middle school concept when the programs are fully implemented. She urges that districts look into the level of implementation of their middle schools before rushing to change to K–8 schools (Pardini, 2002). McEwin, Dickinson, and Jacobson (2004) also point out that there is no definitive evidence that students in K–8 schools perform better than students in middle schools.

Factors to Consider

Given the lack of definitive research, what grade configuration maximizes benefits for students? What considerations should be addressed? Grade configuration decisions are often based on strong academic arguments, demographics, and the current inventory of available facilities (DeJong & Craig, 2002). The middle school movement was originally based on research that showed that the most prevalent junior high school configuration was not meeting the needs of young adolescents. It was also argued that the elementary schools were not prepared to meet the higher level math, science, and world language needs of the their seventh- and eighth-grade students.

The community context is also an important consideration. A grade span that one community might find desirable would not be accepted in another (Paglin & Fager, 1997). DeYoung, Howley, and Theobald (1995) argue that middle schools could be inappropriate in rural areas because they result in the consolidation of small elementary schools, which leads to the loss of the sense of ownership and community enjoyed by the neighborhood school and a decline in parent participation. In an urban community, however, overcrowding in elementary schools is often the impetus for building a new middle school. Elementary boundaries often stay the same or only exhibit minimal change.

When all is said and done, it is clear that students can not only succeed but also prosper in any type of grade arrangement. It would be unfortunate for students if districts where middle level students exhibit less-than-desirable results were to merely change their grade configuration to K–8 without looking deeply into their curriculum, programs, and instructional delivery system. If they do, those districts will continue to fail and in 30 years will be looking for another magic bullet—perhaps the return of the middle school.
References