

Sustaining the Development of Middle Schools into the 21st Century

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The authors suggest how to handle the multi-pronged attack against the middle schools, the battles staged in parents' meetings, school board meetings and state legislature sessions.

Middle schools across America are under attack! This is occurring even as they are on the verge of almost wiping out junior high schools. Just as middle schools are ready to declare a numerical victory, they are facing new challenges. Attacks come as intense and often impassioned discussions and debates regarding the current operations, future funding, and in some cases the very existence or continuation of middle schools. The battlefields are parents' meetings, school board meetings, and state legislative sessions. Why are middle schools under attack and what can we do about it? Citizens need first to understand that there is a vast difference between a school organized as a middle school and one that has implemented programmatically the middle school concept. Roughly half of the schools organized as middle schools, and so named, incorporate few if any of the features recommended by advocates. To expect such schools to show results on test scores is ridiculous for their instructional practices and curriculum may be essentially as they were when a junior high. The situation is described well by George and Shewey (1995) in these sentences:

In hundreds, perhaps thousands, of schools called "middle," the components of the program are honored more in the breach than in their presence. In such schools, teams exist in organization but not in action.

Advisory programs are merely seemingly endless 30-minute homerooms. The curriculum parallels what the Committee of Ten recommended a century ago. Instruction can often be even more traditional than the curriculum. More tragically, middle schools which had been models of effective programs, have all too often experienced “educational erosion” resulting in the disappearance of exciting and empowering educational experiences.

What has happened to keep schools from full implementation? Why are so many communities philosophically and/or financially seeming to abandon their support of middle schools? As we reach toward the 21st century and the new millennium why are so many communities asking their middle schools to follow a path similar to the one followed by Michael J. Fox in his recent series of films where he travelled back in time in an attempt to get to the future!

Farkas and DeBacker (1996) suggest that in an almost romantic desire to abandon the pressures and challenges of our complex modern day society, many communities seem to be finding comfort in their desire to return to a time when life seemed simpler, a time when communities did not face the challenges of a fast moving technological society laboring under the pressures of drugs, crime and the break down of the nuclear family, a time when few if any middle schools had to face the issues of gangs or assaults nor debate the relative merits of advisory, heterogenous grouping, differentiated instruction, curriculum compacting, diversity or multicultural education. This time of seeking to abandon pressures and challenges becomes a time many communities romantically recall as their Camelot!

Some of the reasons why middle schools are under attack are identified below:

1. School budgets are being slashed everywhere, and good middle schools are not inexpensive operations.
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Economy-minded boards look askance at such practices as providing both personal and team planning times and at exploratory/enrichment type programs that they might characterize as frills.

2. The continued lack of understanding on the part of the general public concerning the nature of early adolescence. These children have been and often still are, "growing up forgotten." Parents for the most part underestimate the importance of these years and do not recognize the enduring influence of the experiences youth undergo during the middle school years.
 3. Lack of understanding of educational programs that are a part of middle schools--teaming, advisory, mini-courses, etc. As the new kid on the block, the middle school is viewed with suspicion. It doesn't match the experience of the parents and is therefore questioned.
 4. Lack of sufficient research data to satisfy questioning boards of education and parents, Particularly critical is information that relates to standardized test scores. Fortunately new data are becoming available (see March, 1997 Kappan) to support the effectiveness of the middle school concept, but such information is not yet widely circulated.
 5. Support for the status quo by those who succeeded under it. The attackers for the most part are those who rose to the top in the competitive system that has been in place. The sorting and selecting functions of such schools are acceptable with them. There still exists a lot of elitism, though it is not necessarily recognized as such.
 6. The extreme religious right who don't want schools to teach values. They object advisory programs, teaching critical thinking, or discussions of controversial issues. "Just teach the rudiments of learning," they say, however naive such a position is.
 7. The growing diversity of our student bodies in terms of cultural backgrounds, religious, race, prior experiences,
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and achievement levels is often overwhelming and presents new problems, concerns, and calls for adjustments.

How do middle level educators respond to these communities who are heading “Back to the Future” in search of their “Camelot” and taking their middle schools and students along for the ride? What can we do? The following actions or positions should be considered and, as many as possible put into practice.

1. Stay the course, keep the initiative knowing that the middle school concept is valid, is based on the best we know about learning and human growth and development. Clarify in the people’s minds the differences between a school merely organized as a middle school and one that implements the concept.
 2. Become familiar with the research that does exist and which shows the middle school concept, when implemented, improves test scores and personal development.
 3. Remind people that while all desirable evidence may still be lacking on the academic advantage of middle schools, there is absolutely no evidence to demonstrate the advantage of maintaining the status quo and the junior high school model. The widespread belief that our public schools are failing is because of the continued use of practices for which there is no supportive hard data. And further, there is no research data to show that students enrolled in schools that do implement the middle school concept suffer in any way, academically or otherwise.
 4. Carry out an educational mission to share with parents and citizens information about the nature and needs of young adolescents. Use radio spots, articles in the local paper (including some written by non-educators such as pediatricians, juvenile court workers, social workers, and psychologists).
 5. Building on this information background, relate how
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middle school teachers match the nature of kids at this age level. Especially important is the matter of helping parents appreciate the enduring importance of this age level, mentioned earlier, for it is during these years that young people make up their minds about their values and personal beliefs. For this reason middle schools must be concerned with the affective domains, students' self-concepts, and to fulfilling the exploratory responsibility. Make it clear that middle schools accept responsibility for both academic and personal development because the two are closely interrelated at this stage of life. Make a special point of helping parents see that it is during these years that experimentation with many activities that have life-threatening consequences begins. A school that only deals with the three R's is sadly neglecting its responsibilities.

6. Become thoroughly familiar with This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle School Level Schools (1995). Make copies available to board members and parents. Set up a parents' shelf in the school and include stuff like H.E.L.P. and Living with a Work in Progress. Get the PTA to start circulating some of these materials among parents and possibly sponsoring discussion groups based on them.

The challenges we now face have made the task of charting our way to the twenty first century extremely difficult. Due to local politics and conditions, many communities have left tough problems on the doorsteps of their schools. Rather than deal with some issues as community-wide problems to be faced in a collaborative fashion, many locals have left them for the schools. Society has found it easier to mandate schools to do what many communities themselves cannot or will not do, thus forcing the schools to expand their original agendas of being an educational institution to becoming the communities' social-personal development, recreational and athletic institutions.

Additionally, in many communities, middle level education critics, for a wide variety of reasons, have a vision of what middle level education should be which is fundamentally different from the vision held by the majority of the members of the community. This unrepresentative group of individuals rally in support of those who would like to “declare public education a disaster and get on with their lives” (Smith, 1995). Although these critics represent a small percentage of the community, they have developed their skills (organizing, debating, writing and electing) to a level in many communities that has allowed their vision to become a new vision for everyone.

To sustain the development of middle schools into the 21st Century, we must also recognize that middle schools do not exist in isolation. They are integral members of complex communities that are vastly influenced by both personal and public agendas on a local, state, and national level. Not to recognize this is to invite failure. If we are to sustain the momentum that has led to the implementation of the middle school concept, we must become intimately familiar with the lessons learned from the survivors of the educational change and school reform movement (Little, 1996). The debate about middle schools and their relative successes does not exist in isolation. The possibility exists that in many cases the attack on the middle school is merely using the most vulnerable and available point for getting at deeper social issues and public education itself. Regardless, it is imperative that those knowledgeable about and involved in middle level education maintain a proactive stance and respond to critics forthrightly. We need to continue our course into the 21st Century and not retreat leaving the future to those who think mistakenly that the past holds promise for our students’ futures.

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