

Reinventing the Middle School

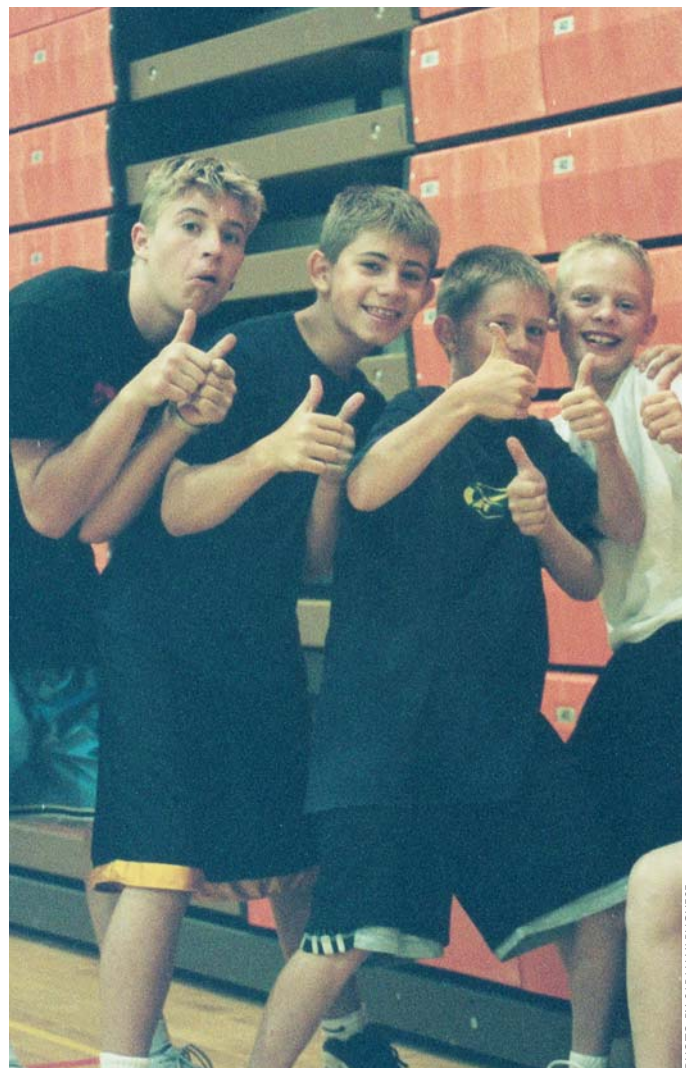
At least six factors have contributed to the arrested development of middle schools. To reinvent such schools will require an understanding of the ecological nature of the middle school concept, one that includes profound curricular change.

By Thomas S. Dickinson & Deborah A. Butler

There is nothing wrong with the middle school concept.

The concept—a school for young adolescents that was based on their developmental needs—is as valid today as it was in either of its previous iterations at the turn of the 20th century or in the early 1960s. The concept that the founders of the middle level school proposed is valid because it is based upon responding to the unique developmental needs of children in transition.

But if there is nothing wrong with the middle school concept, what is wrong with many contemporary middle schools? In middle schools across this nation the story is the same—schools with signs outside that say “middle school” but with almost no identifiable aspects of the concept at work inside; teachers organized into teams but who do not meet even though they have allocated



Young adolescent enthusiasm is ready to be channeled.

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time in their schedules; a deep cleavage between core and exploratory teachers; advisory programs that look like administrative homerooms; competitive athletics for the few; and a curriculum dominated by classical recitation, boring textbooks, and instructional blandness (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996).

In school after school the words “middle school concept” has become a phrase mindlessly uttered, but with no understanding of the real meaning of the phrase. What has happened across this country at the middle level is the arrested development of the middle school concept. While there are many schools that have implemented the entire concept, the majority of middle schools are in some stage of arrested development—where the middle school concept has not been completely implemented, or where it was once implemented and has now grown static and unresponsive (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996). Arrested development then, is both a structural problem of the lack of implementation as well as a disposition problem of belief in and attention to the concept.

What misleads many middle level educators, what the movement has not made a forceful argument over, is that the original concept is a totally

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integrated ecology of schooling. It is an organizational, curricular, instructional and relational environment that cannot be parsed or broken (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand & Flowers, 1997). Any attempt to do so, as in many well-intentioned schools, leads to the condition of arrested development.

The Path to Arrested Development

This article examines the elements of transition to middle schools as they have been played out over the last 40 years and that have come to create arrested development for many middle schools. The failure is widespread, both historically and across groups.

The following discussion examines a number of elements that have contributed to arrested development in middle schools. While these are examined in a linear fashion, the reader should be aware that these elements operated in a synergistic fashion throughout the history of middle schools. The interplay of the elements, over time, and cast against broad historical movements in American education, brought about the present condition of many middle schools (Hechinger, 1993).

1. The incremental stage implementation model used by middle schools to implement the concept.

When the first middle schools began their transition from junior high schools in the early 1960s the field was wide open for this process of transition. While much of the concept had already been articulated by the founders of the movement—individuals such as Alexander, Lounsbury, and Vars—there was no set pattern for conversion. But after the first wave of early transitions, which were close collaborative efforts between early advocates and school-based personnel, a pattern began to take root that would in itself contribute to arrested development: this was an incremental stage implementation model.

A particular junior high school would decide to make the transition to a middle school and would begin with, for example, teaming in the 7th grade (this often happened since the 6th grade was still in the elementary school). Teachers, with or without appropriate inservice and preparation, and most without any university training, would find themselves on teams, or even a pilot team at a grade level. The next year the 8th grade would follow, and then the 6th. After this the exploratory (elective) teachers would be grouped as a team, although nothing in their assignments, student loads, or other preparation would change. Five years into the transition an advisory program would be implemented along with a flexible schedule, but by then the original composition of the first core teams would be different. None of these elements, all introduced in a linear fashion, would be integrated vertically—grade level teams with each other, core teams with exploratory teams, teams with advisory, or all these elements with the flexible schedule.

Somewhere along the line the school would stumble—a change in an administrator or administration commitment, disenchantment and then overt resistance on the part of a small but vocal faculty group, or even more common, a lack of understanding that

the job was not finished—that the middle school concept was much more than mere structural changes. Most telling was that through all these incremental changes the curriculum and its instructional delivery pattern was virtually untouched.

2. The lack of teacher education programs and licensure that focus on the middle school level.

One of the primary failures of the junior high school was its failure to establish teacher education programs to educate professionals for this new school (Dickinson & Butler, 1994; Dickinson & McEwin, 1998a; McEwin & Dickinson, 1996). Much of the middle school's history duplicates this historical trend (Gatewood & Mills, 1973; McEwin, 1984; McEwin & Allen, 1984; McEwin & Dickinson, 1996). While some progress has been made in preparation programs (McEwin & Dickinson, 1995), state licensure (Valentine & Moger, 1992; McEwin & Dickinson, 1997), and even national standards for middle school teachers (National Middle School Association, 1996), the sad fact remains that the majority of teachers throughout the history of the middle school movement's last 40 years have not been educated to teach at this level. That situation is not now changing (McEwin, Dickinson & Jenkins, 1996).

The result of the lack of middle school teacher preparation and middle school licensure is that professionals, even those who find that they enjoy teaching this age group, often find themselves woefully ignorant of middle school theory and philosophy, unschooled in appropriate curriculum and instruction for young adolescents, and ignorant of the place and purpose of middle school organizational practices and the complex role of the middle school teacher (Alexander & McEwin, 1982; McEwin, 1984; McEwin & Allen, 1984; McEwin, Dickinson, Erb & Scales, 1995; Scales & McEwin, 1994; McEwin & Dickinson, 1996).

3. The lack of attention to curriculum.

From the start of the current middle school movement advocates and practitioners concentrated their attention on the organizational structures of the middle school concept. While there were a number of recognized curriculum leaders among the founders—Alexander, Lounsbury, Vars, Eichhorn, and Toepfer, for example—little attention was given to their curriculum proposals. In middle school after middle school the curriculum that existed prior to transition remained untouched. This situation—a school without a curriculum of its own—meant that

the middle school concept existed as a shell in even the best middle schools.

When Beane's (1993) work on integrated curriculum burst on the middle school scene in the early 1990s, the middle school concept had at last its own distinctive curriculum. The clarion call of Beane's work brought forth an outpouring of related efforts by other curriculum theorists as well as practi-

From the start of the middle school movement little attention was given to curricular reforms as opposed to organizational ones.

tioners who had been practicing this approach, often for many years, in disconnected enclaves around the country (Arnold, 1993; Dickinson, 1993; Pate, Homestead & McGinnis, 1997; Stevenson & Carr, 1993). This outpouring of theory, application, and stories of practitioners engaged in integrated curriculum work made the early 1990s seem a golden age of curriculum.

But this window of change may in fact be gone with our headlong rush into standardized testing and the consequent impoverishment of the middle school curriculum. This lack of adoption of integrated curriculum and the unexamined adherence to a secondary separate subject approach may forever doom middle schools to arrested development.

4. The failure of National Middle School Association to fully realize leadership for the middle level.

Throughout the National Middle School Association's brief history, this professional association has done much that is positive and laudable, especially through its rich and extensive publications program. However, for much of its brief history the association has been insular and inward looking.

A principal function of professional associations is that of advocacy. National Middle School Association has, throughout its history, been hesitant to aggressively advocate, through stated official policy or official position papers, much of any official position other than that promoted in its main philosophy document *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 1995). As a result the association, rather than lead, has followed the movement.

This “following behind” stance is most recently visible in relation to the research spawned by the Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997). The most important research in the history of the middle school movement was not conceived, directed, or supported by National Middle School Association, but by a state affiliate in Illinois. Growing out of its summer institutes for teams and schools, the Association of Illinois Middle-Level Schools (AIMS) grew a grassroots network of reformed schools. Turning to a US Department of Education grant in the late 1980s, the association, in

A number of lighthouse schools have taken an ecological approach to middle school implementation.

concert with the University of Illinois, began research on reformed middle schools in its network, those taking an ecological approach to middle school change. This research, reported by Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, and Flowers (1997), has had a profound impact on the movement, but not because of aggressive and timely publication by NMSA, which did not begin publishing the results of these studies for a year and a half after *Kappan* scooped the story (Erb & Stevenson, 1998, 1999a; 1999b; 1999c; Stevenson & Erb, 1998). Any professional association exists to lead. The absence of overt and aggressive leadership on the part of this association has contributed to the arrested development of middle schools across the nation.

5. The absence of research, until recently, to sustain the middle school concept.

No educational reform movement can sustain its efforts without comprehensive and systematic research on the impact and effect of its reforms. To attempt to do so would invite appropriate criticism as well as remove a vital ingredient in the overall reform mix. For most of the history of the middle school movement the research that was conducted was done on particular elements or aspects of the middle school concept, substructures, if you will. While this form of research is necessary, little work was done on the entire middle school concept, on its total ecology and its impact on young adolescents and learning. This type of research is complicated,

time-consuming, and costly. It takes significant support beyond that of most individual researchers, support more akin to that available to national associations, private foundations, or governmental agencies. Because of this lack of wholistic research, much of the middle school movement and the implementation of the middle school concept was built on faith. Advocates “knew” in their hearts and minds that this was the way to go (Van Zandt & Totten, 1995).

Now that significant research is available, this research sustains the position of middle school advocates and is a sign of hope for the future if schools caught in a state of arrested development will but reinvent themselves (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997). But, as is the case with integrated curriculum, time may have passed the movement by.

6. Our overall misunderstanding of the original concept as a total ecology of schooling.

As we have alluded to throughout this article, one of the significant elements of arrested development has been the use of an incremental stage implementation model. The use of this model, which atomizes aspects of the middle school concept to be developed and implemented, is unfortunate since it is incompatible with a concept that is a total ecology of schooling rather than a package of parts. The middle school concept, as a total ecology, is made up of both horizontal and vertical aspects, all interrelated.

The middle school concept is like a Persian rug. Different threads are woven together into complicated patterns and colors until finally it is not discernable where a particular thread goes or where a particular color begins. It is the rug as a whole that we look at and admire. It is the overall integrated effort that is the rug as well as the behind the scenes process of weaving all the threads together.

But in middle school after middle school our rug has been hacked to pieces; torn asunder; mutilated. Different pieces have been hauled into the school, incomplete and unraveling, and thrown down upon the floor. Carving up the middle school concept has wounded it in many places and killed it in others because an ecology cannot exist without all its elements in place. While organizational issues are necessary to implement, so is an appropriate curriculum. While affective programs are necessary, so too are reciprocal relations among all parties to the school—students, parents, faculty, and administration.

If we are to reinvent the middle school, if we are to return to the original middle school concept, then we must begin by acknowledging the complexity of the original concept as a totally integrated organizational-curricular-instructional-relational-developmental concept the likes of which we have not seen before. And we must continually work to establish and develop those individual aspects of the concept with an eye to the total integration of our efforts into a seamless whole. All of us must become weavers of the whole rug rather than isolated specialists. We must become responsible for the whole school, rather than just its parts.

Reinventing the Middle School

If we are to create good middle level schools along the lines of the middle school concept that the founders of this movement articulated in the early 1960s, we must embark on a process of reinvention.

We think it is our *conceptual understandings* of the middle school concept that are in need of reinvention. We believe that a reinvention of the concept in broader, deeper, more current terms, while still keeping true to the heart of the concept, is necessary. This reinvention of *our thinking and understanding* is fundamental to moving forward on any of the suggestions for reinvention that appear in this theme issue.

The critical underpinning of change

Educators need to reinvent and deepen their understandings of the concept in three fundamental ways. First, our *disposition matters*. We all need an *awareness* that the middle school concept is suffering from arrested development. We must acknowledge this. That is, although there are some good aspects to most middle schools, and many are better because they have implemented part of the concept, we must not be complacent, thinking that all is said and done. Statistics of learners, how they fare in schools, in families, and in society tells us differently. The *acceptance* of this, and developing the *disposition toward continued change*, even more than we already have done, is paramount to a continuing healthy development of the concept as an educational effort. To accept change will be an aspect of the future—because stasis *is* arrested development.

Second, movement toward developing and implementing the concept further requires the awareness

and understanding of the middle school concept as an *ecology* of highly complex elements working simultaneously together. Across all of these articles is the notion that implementing the whole of the concept's elements is absolutely fundamental. This notion of *ecology* applies to all the components of the middle school concept as a schooling concept, but this is not all. As a corollary to this, treating arrested development requires an understanding that the middle level concept is part of the larger concept of education and schooling in several ways:

- *as a K-16 continuum*
- *as an important societal institution in this country*
- *as a part of the larger picture of current educational reform movements.*

Third, in recent years, the middle school concept, especially through the promise of a relevant and integrated curriculum component, has been reconceived as the best hope for realizing a Deweyian progressive education philosophy. Janet McDaniel and her colleagues note this critical feature of the middle school concept when they describe the democratic middle school, its curriculum, structures, and processes, and they are not alone in thinking this. As a reformed notion of schooling, the middle school concept is perceived by many as having the potential to become, through the realization of its proposed structures and content, an environment that supports the ideals of schooling for a democracy and an intelligent democratic citizenry.

Reinvention and deep themes of change

And so we come to the main point. Based on the understandings and reinvention of the concept as noted above, the school itself is in need of reinvention. Can we create a school where everyone grows? Can we make them good places for all? For individuals, the society, and mutual futures? Based on the above points, and based on the basic themes resonating in this theme issue that are the keys to reinventing the middle school as an entity, the answer is yes.

The process may be daunting, but it is not impossible. We are not without our lighthouse schools, schools that have taken an ecological approach to the process of implementation and who have continually revisited and adapted their work to the

changing nature of their students (Lipsitz, 1984; Powell, Zehm & Garcia, 1996). As well, we have a significant body of research to guide and sustain implementation of the total concept (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand & Flowers, 1997; Irvin, 1997; Lipsitz, Jackson & Austin, 1997; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). We have significant work on organizational structures over the history of the movement that can positively inform our reinven-

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tion (Arnold & Stevenson, 1998; Clark & Clark, 1994; Dickinson & McEwin, 1998b; Erb & Dickinson, 1997; George, 1991; George & Alexander, 1993; George, Lawrence & Bushnell, 1998)). And finally, we have a curriculum model—integrated curriculum—that places the student at the fore (Arnold, 1993; Beane, 1993; Butler & Manning, 1998; Dickinson, 1993, 1994; Pate, Homestead & McGinnis, 1997; Stevenson & Carr, 1993).

To reinvent middle schools mired in a state of arrested development we must first acknowledge where we are, as painful as that may be. Then we must examine both our attitudes and practices and begin to rework our schools along the lines proposed by the authors of the following articles.

The process of reinvention is important for the middle school but mostly for those young adolescents who are its students. This movement was founded on their appropriate schooling. The original concept that embodied it is still valid. We need to reinvent middle schools in that image once again.

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