

Keynote address of Hayes Mizell on October 1, 2004 at the annual conference of the National School Board Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education. About 100 school board members from throughout the United States participated. The meeting was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Antonio, TX. Mizell is the Distinguished Senior Fellow of the National Staff Development Council.

Still Crazy After All These Years:

Grade Configuration and the Education of Young Adolescents

Many aspects of public education in the United States are effective. Each day, buses pick up millions of children from their homes, transport them to school, and return them safely to their families. Largely without incident, schools open and close on time, and most of them are clean and safe. School systems go to extraordinary trouble and expense to feed children a nutritious lunch, and perhaps even breakfast. Teachers and students benefit from supplies and assistance that are the envy of educators in other countries around the world. The curricula of schools are amazingly diverse, addressing the complete spectrum of students' differing academic needs and talents. While the bureaucratic and logistical challenges in delivering these services dependably and efficiently are daunting, most school systems succeed in doing so.

In light of these and other successes, one cannot help but wonder why so many school systems have so much difficulty when it comes to educating students between the ages of 12 and 15 years old. There seems to be perennial dissatisfaction with how public schools educate these "young adolescents," and consequently there has been no shortage of recommendations for how to educate them more effectively.

This odyssey began more than 100 years ago. The grade configurations of schools varied, but the dominant pattern was eight years of primary school followed by four years of high school. At the end of the nineteenth century, a movement began to start secondary education at the seventh rather than the ninth grade. One rationale was that the transition from elementary to secondary education "may be made natural and easy by changing gradually from the one-teacher regimen to the system of special teachers, thus avoiding the violent shock now commonly felt on entering the high school." By 1910, the first "junior high schools," serving grades seven and eight, had appeared and between 1912 and 1938, the number of these schools increased dramatically. In spite of the subsequent development of more sophisticated educational theories concerning the role of the junior high school, students continued to experience them as gateways to high school. In the decade between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, several factors contributed to an emerging critique of the junior high school. Educators complained that junior high schools mimicked the high school model "with its emphasis on content rather than exploration, departmentalization rather than integration, and an adherence to a rigid schedule." Researchers found that students were reaching puberty earlier than had been the case at the beginning of the twentieth century, and this contributed to the view that the elementary school setting was no longer appropriate for young adolescents, or vice versa. Secondary school enrollments declined while elementary school enrollments

increased significantly, with the corresponding temptation to push sixth grade out of elementary schools to create more space. School desegregation also prompted the reorganization of the middle grades as school systems developed grade configurations to serve new and more diverse school attendance areas. Between 1970 and 1986, the number of junior high schools with a 7-8 grade configuration decreased by about 2,500 while there was a corresponding increase in the number of middle schools serving grades six through eight.¹ This movement accelerated during the 1990s so that by 2000 only five percent of middle level schools had a 7-9 grade configuration. Today, the 5-8 and 6-8 configurations dominate the organization of middle schools.²

While separate middle schools with these grade configurations prevail, a growing number of urban school systems are turning away from this model. As was true of the shifting fortunes of the middle grades during the past century, the reasons for this new phenomenon are both societal and educational. When urban school boards and superintendents embraced the middle school model during the 1970s and 1980s, they did so without developing a deep understanding of the purpose of middle schools or the support they required to be effective. In many cases, school system leaders simply fell in line with the national movement for middle schools and responded to its advocates within their school systems. The argument that young adolescents are experiencing unique developmental challenges requiring special attention was persuasive, as was the promise that “the middle school concept” provided the framework for serving these young people more effectively than elementary or high schools. Yet, in 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development reported, “a volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grades schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents.”³ In 1997, four foundation officials who had invested heavily in improving middle schools wrote:

We have not seen the widespread dramatic improvement in academic outcomes we had hoped for... Middle-grades reform efforts have necessarily focused heavily on developmental responsiveness and the accompanying changes in school climate and organization. But middle-level reform is not a series of disconnected projects involving scheduling, teaming, or advisories. While we believe that schools must continue to press for changes in school climate and organization, school practitioners and policy makers must follow through by focusing increased attention on curriculum, instruction, and assessment so that young adolescents meet high standards of academic performance.⁴

What went wrong? Most school boards and superintendents had no sound philosophy about educating young adolescents, and they lacked information, training, and experience for how to translate whatever beliefs they did have into practical education policy. They also failed to provide teachers and principals with a clear, coherent vision of the outcomes middle schools should achieve. As a result, middle school principals and teachers did the best they could, drawing on bits and pieces of what they understood about the middle school concept to fashion a rationale for their purpose. Too often, however, this produced a mushy amalgam of educational philosophies with a primary emphasis on helping students get through their difficult years of developmental transition.

The academic mission of middle schools frequently took a back seat to addressing students' social-emotional needs. It was not until the schools experienced the full impact of the accountability, standards, and assessment movements that many of them adopted a meaningful academic focus.

School systems that embraced the 6-8 middle school configurations also put too much emphasis on changing the organization of the grades and too little emphasis on the new knowledge, skills, and behaviors teachers and principals would have to develop to make middle schools successful. School boards and superintendents did not come to grips with educators' lack of capacity to make fundamental changes in how they related to and engaged students, or how they organized and operated the schools. School system leaders did not understand that implementing such basic middle school concepts as teaming, integrated curriculum, advisories, common planning time, flexible scheduling, exploratory courses, and honoring student voice⁵ were very difficult, requiring new knowledge, skills, and behaviors, as well as constant oversight, fine tuning, and quality control.

While many school systems did provide some initial training for teachers, the systems' flawed approaches to staff development often neutralized the potential gains. As was true for the systems' overall staff development programs, those for middle school educators were poorly conceived, inconsistently implemented, superficial, unrelated to the realities of teachers' classroom challenges, and without adequate follow-up. Many teachers understood little about young adolescents' development or its implications for teaching and learning. This problem became worse over time as middle schools hired new teachers with little or no training in how to teach middle level students effectively.

By the 1990s, it was common to hear urban middle school educators complain that while their school systems had provided initial support for middle schools, the schools had ceased to be a priority.⁶ There was often no powerful advocate for young adolescents either in the boardroom or the superintendent's cabinet. The fruits of this neglect became apparent at results of states' more demanding assessments became public. The average academic performance of middle school students was not impressive⁷, and educators puzzled over why grade cohorts of students who had consistently improved their performance during their elementary school years suffered significant declines in achievement after entering middle school.

Partly in response to the tepid results of middle schools, in 1997 a group of approximately 60 national middle school leaders, researchers, advocates, and foundation officials organized the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform.⁸ The Forum posited a three-part vision that all schools serving young adolescents, regardless of the schools' grade configuration, should be academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable.⁹ Subsequently, the Forum developed a set of practical but rigorous criteria that describe what these attributes look like in practice.¹⁰ This led, in turn, to the Forum launching an initiative, called "Schools To Watch," to identify middle level schools throughout the nation that are meeting or coming close to meeting these criteria. Currently, the Forum and its state level allies have identified through on-site observations a total of 40 Schools To Watch in nine states, including California, Colorado, Illinois, and North Carolina. According to the Forum, some of the schools are urban, others rural. Some have several thousand students, some several hundred. Some are in high-wealth areas; others are in high-poverty areas.

Some are from very homogeneous communities; others have great racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. Yet all of them are meeting the challenges of middle grades education in ways that foster a community where academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity thrive.¹¹

Because most of the 40 Schools To Watch are middle schools with 6-8 grade configurations, it is clear there are such schools that are educating students effectively. School systems would do well to learn from them.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that many urban school systems are any more committed to making their middle schools perform effectively in 2004 than they were when they first created the schools. Rather than grappling with the difficult substantive issues of how simultaneously to engage students in challenging academic work *and* provide them with the personal and academic supports necessary to increase their levels of proficiency, some school systems have focused on changing schools' grade configurations and reassigning students.

Urban school systems such as Cincinnati, Cleveland, Milwaukee, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, Newark, Paterson, Trenton and Rochester¹² have concluded that 6-8 middle schools no longer work for them. The academic performance of students is a major concern. In New Orleans, eighth-graders in the school system's five K-8 schools, none of them magnets, were twice as likely to pass the state test as compared to students "at the district's failing middle schools." The K-8 students also performed better on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.¹³ Research studies in the Philadelphia¹⁴ and Baltimore¹⁵ school systems reached similar conclusions, as did at least one national review of the limited research on this subject.¹⁶

Another major factor in school systems' decisions to switch to a K-8 configuration involves the issues of student control, discipline, and safety.¹⁷ One researcher has concluded, "The tendency to create narrow grade-span configurations reinforces the bad habit of building larger and larger schools."¹⁸ This seems to be the case in many urban school systems where 6-8 schools have student enrollments that are so large they constitute a hostile context for applying the middle school concept. Fundamental to that concept is personalization, the belief that young adolescents need to be in daily contact with adults who know the students well, take an interest in them, and provide the students with both academic and emotional support. In very large middle schools without skilled leaders to create organizational structures that mitigate the schools' size, personalization does not occur.¹⁹ This can lead, in turn, to students who function at the margins of the school community, become alienated²⁰, and seek recognition or power through aggressive behaviors or acceding to negative peer pressures. One result can be middle schools where children are more vulnerable rather than less so, and where administrators choose to devote more time to student control than to creating the conditions necessary for the students' academic and personal development. Under these circumstances, the middle school concept has little chance of success.

The K-8 grade configuration is attractive to some educators because it appears to accomplish several desirable ends all at the same time. Obviously, it removes children from 6-8 schools that have failed, for whatever reasons, to apply the middle school

concept with a high degree of fidelity. Second, because most K-8 schools are smaller than many middle schools, they may provide young adolescents with the personalization they could not get in poorly administered large middle schools²¹. However, whether K-8 students will also be the beneficiaries of an appropriate and rigorous curriculum is a different issue, and to date there is inadequate research to answer this critical question.²²

Converting a school system to a K-8, 9-12 configuration also eliminates the transition from fifth to sixth grade that occurs when there are 6-8 middle schools. As every parent knows, whenever a young person transitions from one level of schooling to another, whether that is from fifth to sixth grade²³, or eighth to ninth grade, or twelfth grade to post-secondary education, there is potential for difficulty. These transitions require developing new relationships with adults and peers, negotiating unfamiliar and unwritten social norms, and responding to expectations of higher levels of academic performance. Particularly for young adolescents who are also experiencing a variety of developmental stresses, the transition from elementary to middle schools can be problematic. The experience of adolescent development is filled with variables and unknowns, and one can argue that a potential beneficial effect of eliminating the fifth to sixth grade transition is to reduce, or perhaps just delay, the problematic effects of some variables.²⁴

One researcher concluded that the fewer school-to-school transitions children experience, the more likely it is they will have a positive academic experience. After analyzing passing rate data from 232 schools in a large Midwestern inner-city school system, she reported:

As grade span configuration increases so does achievement. The more grade levels that a school services, the better the students perform. The more transitions a student makes, the worse the student performs. The longer a student stays in a given school, the better the student performs.²⁵

The K-8 configuration may also lead to unanticipated political benefits for the school system. Families of young adolescents are understandably concerned about losing influence and control over their children. While many families are quite involved in their children's elementary schools, their participation declines dramatically when their children enter middle school. This is not entirely the responsibility of the parents; middle school leaders often make less effort to engage parents as full partners in the educational process. One effect of a K-8 grade configuration could be that parents' involvement in their children's school during the primary years carries over as their children progress through the upper levels of the K-8 school. Another possible benefit is that parents could feel the K-8 school provides an institutional focus they share with their children for nine years, thereby providing a framework of common interests that parents can use to sustain positive relationships with their children throughout young adolescence. If parents experience greater satisfaction with their children's education because they believe the K-8 configuration helps them maintain positive relationships with both the school and their children, this could translate into a more committed and supportive constituency for the public school system.

Does all this suggest that urban school systems should proceed with haste to abandon their 6-8 middle schools and create in their place a system of K-8 schools? The

answer is “no.” In many urban school systems, some middle schools are performing well. They deserve their school systems’ support²⁶ to perform even more effectively, with the goal of becoming Schools To Watch. There are other 6-8 schools on the brink of performing well, but they need greater attention and support from their school systems.²⁷ Perhaps they need principals with the energy, knowledge²⁸, and skill to develop schools that educate young adolescents effectively. Perhaps the schools need to engage their faculties in more appropriate, intensive and sustained professional learning experiences. Perhaps the schools need the stimulus and assistance that a comprehensive school reform model can provide. Perhaps the schools just need fewer students. When such schools are on the brink of performing well, it is the responsibility of the school board and the superintendent to provide the leadership and resources the schools need to progress to higher levels of academic performance.

There are also, of course, middle schools that consistently perform poorly and may be dysfunctional. When school boards and superintendents do not act forcefully to dramatically reform²⁹ or disestablish these schools, school system leaders become complicit in the schools’ perennial low performance and unhealthy environments that harm successive cohorts of young adolescents. In these cases, converting to a K-8 grade configuration, or forcing another major intervention, may not only be appropriate but long overdue.

Some large urban school systems are turning away from 6-8 middle schools, citing pervasive problems of low academic performance and high rates of disciplinary actions. They say, “middle schools do not work” when what they *should* say is “Some middle schools do not work the way the school system has traditionally organized, led, and supported them.” Contrary to some reports, the conversion to K-8 grade configurations is not a “trend.” In many school systems throughout the United States, educators and families are *not* in angst about their middle schools.³⁰ The only trend is that in some large cities, there are, thankfully, aggressive, reform-minded superintendents seeking to drag their dysfunctional school systems into the twenty-first century. They believe that converting from 6-8 schools to K-8 schools is one way to make a bold stroke for reform, wipe the slate clean, and chart a new and perhaps more productive course for middle grades education.

The motives of other school systems may be less altruistic. Having fouled their own nests through neglect and mismanagement of middle schools, these school systems now want to convert to a K-8 grade configuration in the hope that they can achieve better results with less effort. Perhaps they can, but it will be by exploiting the strengths of the elementary level: smaller schools, more personalization, and high levels of parent involvement. School systems may do little more than reconfigure grades, schools, and attendance zones. There is reason to worry that these school systems may be no more conscientious and vigilant about meeting the unique needs of young adolescents in K-8 schools than they have been about meeting the needs of this age group in 6-8 schools.

School systems may believe that educating young adolescents in K-8 schools will solve many problems, but school boards and superintendents need to know that the wholesale conversion to a K-8 structure is not a matter of “set it and forget it.”³¹ Under *any* grade configuration, educating young adolescents well is hard work³². Whether young adolescents are in 6-8 or K-8 schools, they need engaging, challenging curricula and high quality teaching rooted in knowledge of subject content.³³ Students in K-8

schools, no less than students in 6-8 schools, will need constant attention and care, as will the schools themselves. Even if school officials are ultimately happier and parents more satisfied³⁴, it will not necessarily mean that all young adolescents are developing the knowledge and skills they need to be independent, productive citizens for the remainder of this century. There will always be potential for K-8 schools to fall victim to the same lack of leadership oversight and support that eroded the potential of so many 6-8 middle schools.

There is not adequate research to provide definitive guidance about the relative effectiveness of K-8 and 6-8 schools³⁵, but there is no shortage of information and models for how to educate youth effectively in the middle grades, regardless of the configuration.³⁶ In addition, both K-8 and 6-8 schools have much to learn from successful charter schools where students from African-American, Latino, and low-income families are demonstrating high levels of academic performance.³⁷ Indeed, there is more information and more public and private models for success than at any time during the past thirty years.

Future generations of young adolescents will be no easier to educate than the current generation, or those of the past. Whatever the grade configuration of the schools young adolescents attend, the only hope for them successfully meeting the academic and developmental challenges they face is for school system leaders to understand what it takes to educate these young people effectively, and then act to provide it.

Thank you.

¹ Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kaganoff, Catherine Augustine, Louay Constant, *Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation), 2004, pp. 9-12. Internet on-line. < http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG139.pdf >. 2 September 2004.

² National Middle School Association, *NMSA Research Summary #1: Grade Configuration*. Internet on-line. < <http://www.nmsa.org/research/ressum1.htm> >. 2 September 2004.

³ Juvonen, et. al., *Focus on the Wonder Years*, p. 14.

⁴ Joan Lipsitz, M. Hayes Mizell, Anthony W. Jackson, Leah Meyer Austin, "Speaking With One Voice: A Manifesto for Middle-Grades Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan* (March 1997). Internet on-line. < http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k_v78/k9703man.htm >. 2 September 2004.

⁵ "Student voice is formed of the unique perspective of the young people in our schools. It is formed in the same ways that adult voice is; that is, experience and education help students create opinions, ideas, and beliefs to which they give their voice...However, it is not enough to simply recognize that there is such a thing as student voice. In order to truly empower students, educators must acknowledge, employ, accentuate, and enforce student voice throughout schools." Adam Fletcher, *Broadening the Bounds of Involvement: Transforming Schools With Student Voice* (New Horizons for Learning). Internet on-line. < <http://www.newhorizons.org/voices/fletcher.htm> >. 2 September 2004.

⁶ Albuquerque recently eliminated the position of coordinator for middle school curriculum when the school system cut 83 jobs to balance the budget. An experienced district administrator said that "sent a message to principals that when everything's lined up, middle school gets moved down the line." Susan Gran, "Years After Alarm, Middle Schools Still Cry For Rescue," *Albuquerque Tribune*, 16 August 2004. Internet on-line. < http://www.abqtrib.com/archives/news04/081604_news_middle.shtml >. 2 September 2004.

⁷ John Funk, "Middle Schools, Middling Scores," *The Wichita Eagle*, 28 September 2004. Internet on-line. < <http://www.kansas.com/mld/eagle/news/local/7781902.htm> >. 28 September 2004.

⁸ See the web site of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform at < www.mgforum.org >.

⁹ National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, *Our Vision Statement*. Internet on-line. < <http://www.mgforum.org/about/vision.asp> >. 2 September 2004.

¹⁰ See the criteria at: < <http://www.mgforum.org/ImprovingSchools/STW/STWcriteria.asp> >. A detailed self-assessment guide based on the criteria is at < <http://www.schoolstowatch.org/criteria/AssessmentChart.pdf> >.

¹¹ Joan Lipsitz, John Harrison, Susie DeHart, "Schools To Watch Update," [e-mail attachment from John Harrison], 25 August 2004, p. 2. To review four schools' case studies and take a "virtual tour", see < <http://www.schoolstowatch.org/visit.htm> >.

¹² Catherine Gewertz, "City Districts Embracing K-8 Schools," *Education Week* (Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education), 19 May 2004. The Rochester school system discontinued its 6-8 middle school configuration in favor of a 7-12 configuration for secondary schools and K-6 for elementary schools. John Gehring, "To Stem Dropouts, Urban Districts Switch Strategies," *Education Week*, 11 August, 2004. Internet on-line. < www.edweek.org > (registration required). 2 September 2004. "In New Jersey, home to 335 middle schools, a debate over what to do with them seems to be playing out largely along urban and suburban lines." Debra Nussbaum, "Why Middle Schools Are Being Questioned," *New York Times*, 12 September 2004. Internet on-line. < <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/12/nyregion/12NJ.html> >. 16 September 2004. In Nashville, which has had K-4 elementary and 5-8 middle schools since 1998, 72% of parents would like the school system to move the fifth grade back to the elementary level. However, parental support for the move drops dramatically if it means their children would have to attend classes in a portable or attend a school in another zone. Diane Long, "Parents Want K-5 Schools, But Not Trade-Offs, Survey Indicates," *The Tennessean*, 27 September 2004. Internet on-line. < http://www.tennessean.com/education/archives/04/09/58489841.shtml?Element_ID=58489841 >. 29 September 2004.

¹³ Aesha Rasheed, "N.O. Closing Book on Middle Schools," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), 26 August 2004. Internet on-line. < <http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/base/news-2/109349996872230.xml> >. 2 September 2004.

¹⁴ Kieth Look, *The Great K-8 Debate* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Education Fund), 2001. Internet on-line. < <http://www.philaedfund.org/notebook/TheGreatK8Debate.htm> >. 2 September 2004.

¹⁵ Baltimore City Public School System, Division of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability, *An Examination of K-5, 6-8 Versus K-9 Grade Configurations*, 13 November 2001, p. 9. Internet on-line. < http://www.bcps.k12.md.us/Student_Performance/PDF/IR_K5_6_8_Comprehensive_Report_Nov2001.pdf >. 2 September 2004.

¹⁶ Theodore Coladarci and Julie Hancock, "The (Limited) Evidence Regarding Effects of Grade-Span Configurations on Academic Achievement: What Rural Educators Should Know," *ERIC Digest* (Charleston, WVA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools), August 2002. Internet on-line. < http://www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed467714.html >. 2 September 2004.

¹⁷ "In other words, educators in [New Jersey]'s more troubled urban areas view the K-8 formula as a way to keep a lid on such problems as truancy and a high dropout rate, low academic performance, violence, and substance abuse." Nussbaum, "Why Middle Schools Are Being Questioned," *NYT*. " 'One of the things that always concerned me about the middle school is bunching up and putting all the adolescent kids in one place, not that it can't work,' [a former superintendent] said. 'Elementary school is a safe place.'" Colleen Sparks, "Middle Schools vs. K-8," *The Arizona Republic*, 19 September 2004. Internet on-line. < <http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/0919edmiddle19.html> >. 21 September 2004.

¹⁸ Craig B. Howley, "Grade-Span Configurations: Where 6th and 7th Grades Are Assigned May Influence Student Achievement, Research Suggests," *School Administrator* (Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators), March 2002. Internet on-line. < http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2002_03/howley.htm >. 2 September 2004.

¹⁹ "The good news for smaller schools is that they tend to have more frequent middle school practices, especially schools with middle school grade configurations and those that are teaming with common planning time. The good news for larger schools is that teaming with common planning time can improve their practices in the same way as size does for smaller schools. Teaming makes smaller schools better and larger schools smaller." Steven B. Mertens, Nancy Flowers, Peter F. Mulhall, "School Size Matters in Interesting Ways," *Middle School Journal* (Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association), May 2001, p. 4-5. Internet on-line. < <http://www.cprd.uiuc.edu/> >. 2 September 2004. National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, *Policy Statement: Small Schools and Small Learning Communities* (Newton, MA: National Forum...), June 2004. Internet on-line. < <http://www.mgforum.org/Policy/small%20communities/small%20communities.pdf> > 2 September 2004.

²⁰ "...on average, students reported a declining sense of belonging from the spring of sixth grade through the spring of seventh grade. That is, as students' length of tenure in middle school increased, their sense of acceptance in and connectedness to that setting decreased. Given the importance of adolescents' sense of school belonging for a range of academic and psychosocial outcomes, this finding highlights the need for school-level interventions to address middle school students' sense of alienation...It seems clear that early adolescents' identification with and commitment to schooling is influenced by not only their academic success and aspirations but also by the interpersonal relationships they perceive in the classroom." Lynley H. Anderman, "Academic and Social Perceptions as Predictors of Change in Middle School Students' Sense of School Belonging," *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 22 September 2003.

²¹ "Because the middle school philosophy is more closely aligned with the child-centered philosophy of the elementary school than with the subject-centered approach of the high school, middle school practices are more acceptable and easier to achieve with elementary-trained teachers." David L. Hough, "The Case for the Elemiddle School," *Middle Matters* (Arlington, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals), Winter 2003. Internet on-line. < <http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=534&action=print> >. 2 September 2004.

²² "Should policymakers adopt the initial recommendation..to implement additional K-8 schools, administration may wish to plan a special focus on implementing an accountability system to ensure that students have equal access to, and comparable enrollment patterns in, Algebra I and foreign language. This is particularly pertinent given the newly formulated middle and high school reform efforts to enhance academic performance and preparedness for post-secondary education." Baltimore City Public School System, Division of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability, *An Examination of K-5, 6-8 Versus K-9 Grade Configurations*.

²³ "The students involved in a pyramid transition of multiple elementary schools into a single middle school experienced a greater achievement loss than did the students in a linear transition of a single elementary school to a middle school. Mixing students from multiple elementary schools in the transition may tend to increase the transition achievement loss. The middle schools in this study may or may not have implemented the recommended middle school transition strategies...The students attending middle schools experienced a greater achievement loss in the transition to high school than did the students making the transition from a K-8 elementary school. The experience of making a previous transition did not moderate the achievement loss during the transition to high school." John W. Alspaugh, "Achievement Loss Associated with the Transition to Middle and High School," *Journal of Educational Research*, 1 September 1998.

²⁴ “It appears that attending a K–8 school and avoiding the discontinuity associated with a transition to a middle school had a positive impact on sixth-grade students’ proficiency in mathematics as well as reading. . . . Due to the limitations of available achievement data, the results of this study do not address directly whether the discontinuity associated with a school transition during early adolescence or a poor stage-environment fit in middle grades schools is responsible for the negative social, emotional, and school-related consequences experienced by many early adolescents in middle grades schools. The results do suggest, however, that continuity in the school sphere plus teaching and learning experiences aligned to early adolescents’ social, emotional, and intellectual needs result in better academic performance.” Paulette Poncelet and Metis Associates, “Restructuring Schools in Cleveland for the Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Development of Young Adolescents,” *Journal of Education for Student Placed At Risk* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.), 2004, Vol. 9, No. 2.

²⁵ Stephanie D. Wren, “The Effects of Grade Span Configuration and School-to-School Transition on Student Achievement,” *The Journal of At-Risk Issues* (Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network), Winter 2004, p. 9.

²⁶ See: Michelle Feist, *A Web of Support: The Role of Districts in Urban Middle-Grades Reform* (New York, NY: Academy for Educational Development), 2003. Internet online.
< http://www.emcf.org/pdf/student_webofsupport_aedreport.pdf >. 2 September 2004.

²⁷ “The panel recommended that the district phase out its existing K-8 schools that fail to provide separate and distinct middle school programs. Its 12-page report did not specify which, if any, of the city’s K-8 schools should be closed. Middle schools should be located in their own buildings and include grades six to eight, the report said. The panel based its findings in large measure on a 2002 state Education Department policy study of middle schools. The panel, calling K-8 a short-term solution, urged the district to take a long-term approach to middle schools. The long-term answer is 6-8, the report said.” Maureen Nolan, “Study Avoids School Closure Issue; Community Panel’s Members Focus Instead on Fixing Syracuse Middle Schools,” *The [Syracuse, NY] Post-Standard*, 7 May 2003.

²⁸ One resource is the “National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform Leadership Training Curriculum” (Newton, MA: Education Development Center), 2003. For a complete description and ordering information, go to < <http://www.mgforum.org/leadership/modules/leadership.htm> >.

²⁹ See: *Case Study: Stemmers Run Middle School – Baltimore County Maryland*, (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board) 2004. Internet on-line.
< http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/case_studies/04V46_Stemmers%20Run.pdf >. 28 September 2004. *Driven to Succeed: High Performing, High-Poverty Turnaround Middle Schools – Volume I: Cross-Case Analysis* (Austin, TX: The Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas), 2002. Robert Balfanz and Douglas MacIver, “Transforming High-Poverty Urban Middle Schools Into Strong Learning Institutions: Lessons from the First Five Years of the Talent Development Middle School,” *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 2000, Volume 5, Nos. 1&2. Dan Jesse, Alan Davis, Nancy Pokorny, “High-Achieving Middle Schools for Latino Students in Poverty” *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 2004, Vol. 9, No. 1.

³⁰ “Other parents and administrators say middle schools offer students the chance to learn from specialized teachers experienced with their age group, more choices of elective classes, more extracurricular activities and the chance to mature and meet new peers.” Colleen Sparks, “Middle Schools vs. K-8,” *The Arizona Republic*.

³¹ Some practitioners responsible for K-8 schools are concerned that “teachers are not highly qualified to teach their subjects in grades 6-8, the kids generally want out, they are not as well prepared for high school, and there is high teacher turnover.” Amy Clark, *National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform - Proceedings of Semi-Annual Meeting, Kansas City Missouri, June 8-9, 2004* (Newton, MA: Education Development Center), p. 4.

³² “If your middle schools are not doing as well as you'd like, look at the program, the leadership, the faculty (and the facility), before you consider changing the grade organization. A good program can operate in a K-8 building, in a 5-8 or a 6-8. But if the program is wrong, moving to a K-8 organization, or any other, isn't going to make a difference.” Paul Abramson, “Problems with Middle Schools (A Final Thought),” *School Planning and Management*, 1 May 2004. “Factors that may affect a decision about grade span may be the interests and training of the staff, the size and design of the building, financial resources, the size of the student population, and the location of the school in relation to other schools.” Catherine Pagler and Jennifer Fager, *Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory), July 1997, p. 7. Internet on-line. < <http://www.nwrel.org/request/july97/grade.pdf> >. 22 September 2004.

³³ Sondra Cooney, Gene Bottoms, *A Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Middle Grades Classroom: What States, Districts and Schools Can Do* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board), 2003. Internet on-line. < http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/pubs/02V56_HighlyQualifiedTeacher.pdf >. 2 September 2004.

³⁴ “Several local parents and school administrators say they like K-8 schools because they offer sixth-through eighth-grade students smaller class sizes, opportunities to mentor younger students, less peer pressure and the chance to stay in their same neighborhood with familiar faces.” Colleen Sparks, “Middle Schools vs. K-8,” *The Arizona Republic*.

³⁵ Princilla Pardini, “Research on K-8: Limited and Inconclusive,” *School Administrator* (Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators), March 2002. Internet on-line. < http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2002_03/pardini_research.htm >. 2 September 2004.

³⁶ For example, see: *MiddleWeb*, the Internet’s independent, comprehensive site for all issues related to the middle grades, at < www.middleweb.com >. Joan Lord, *Getting the Mission Right in the Middle Grades*, 2004; Sondra Cooney, Gene Bottoms, *What Works to Improve Student Achievement in the Middle Grades*, 2003; Bottoms, Cooney, Kathleen Carpenter, *Improving the Middle Grades: Action That Can Be Taken Now*, 2003. Rafael Heller, Sarah Calderon, Elliott Medrich, Bottoms, Cooney, Caro Feagin, *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?*, 2002 (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board). Anthony Jackson, Gayle Davis, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Young Adolescents in the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press), 2000. Joellen Killion, *What Works in the Middle: Results-Based Staff Development* (Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council), 1999. *National Forum Policy Statement – Student Assignment in the Middle Grades: Towards Academic Success for All Students* (Newton, MA: Education Development Center), 2003. Educational Research Service, *Reading at the Middle and High School Levels: Building Active Readers Across the Curriculum* (Arlington, VA: ERS), 2004. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, *Standards in Practice, Grades 6-8* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English), 1999. Anthony Jackson, P. Gayle Andrews, Holly Holland, Priscilla Pardini, *Making the Most of Middle School: A Field Guide for Parents and Others* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press), 2004. U.S. Department of Education, *Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence – For Parents of Children from 10 Through 14* (Washington, DC: USDOE Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, 2002).

³⁷ “Amistad Academy's eighth-graders - overwhelmingly poor and minority - are now outperforming their peers in New Haven and in wealthy suburbs around the state... ‘Now we know what works,’ says Douglas McCurry, the executive director of Achievement First, the Connecticut nonprofit set up to replicate Amistad Academy. ‘If you look at [successful charters] they would look similar.’ They all, he says, have a curriculum that has been proven to work, strict discipline, high expectations and an ‘intense focus on getting good teachers.’ ... Three..new Baltimore middle schools now beginning their third year also have shown remarkable progress with populations that are nearly all African-American and poor. KIPP Ujima Village Academy, which follows a model similar to Amistad, had the highest fifth- and sixth-grade math scores in the city this year. And the Crossroads School had sixth-graders with some of the highest reading scores in the city. Liz Bowie, “Charter Schools: Success Stories Setting Example,” *Baltimore Sun*, 28 September 2004.