



Brandon, a senior, and Principal Kathleen Lamb at Rochester's East High, now a school serving grades 7-12.

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News & Analysis on Urban School Reform from The Piton Foundation

the term paper

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FROM ECE-5 TO ECE-8: BRYANT WEBSTER'S JOURNEY

Bryant Webster
School is growing up.

By TAMI TAYLOR AND CINDY ZIEGLER

During the 2004-05 school year, we added the first sixth grade ever to Bryant Webster, located in North-west Denver. This marked the first step in converting what has been a successful elementary school into what we are confident will be an exemplary ECE-8 school.

It has been a bumpy yet oddly cathartic ride.

For us, the two sixth-grade teachers last year, the workload has been more than we could ever have imagined. But the results have made it well worth the effort.

Undeniably, a change of this magnitude – and the magnitude should not be underestimated – cannot succeed without extensive planning, understanding the changing needs of the students in the middle school years, and becoming familiar with a vast

quantity of curriculum that needs to be covered.



It is not an undertaking to be entered into lightly.

Some Background

The student population of Bryant Webster is over 90 percent Latino. Roughly the same percent-

age qualifies for free and reduced lunch, a proxy for poverty. More than 50 percent of our students are native Spanish-speakers. The combination of these factors place our students highly at risk of dropping out before graduating from high school.

To some of our students, a high school degree is seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. A college degree is a far away dream, not a concrete possibility.

We started the ECE-8 conversion with a clear goal in mind: every student will graduate from high school with the skills and strategies needed to successfully complete college. To do this, they will have to be articulate, avid readers, capable writers, skilled mathematicians, insightful problem solvers, and community-minded individuals.

from

THE EDITOR



ECE-8s: WILL DENVER GET IT RIGHT?

Parents love them. Most principals favor them. Teachers have mixed opinions. Research is inconclusive.

Yet early childhood through eighth-grade schools are taking Denver by storm.

Denver Public Schools issued no grand policy proclamation, but the current school year marks a major shift toward ECE-8 schools and away from traditional sixth- through eighth-grade middle schools.

Ten former elementary schools (ECE-5) in the Denver Public Schools system have begun a three-year conversion to ECE-8s. The 10

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We are proud of our kids and know they will reach any goal we set for them and any they set for themselves.

Over the years, achievement at Bryant Webster has significantly surpassed other Denver schools with similar student demographics. We believe this proves that smart planning, a consistent approach, and effective teaching can help close the achievement gaps that plague our society.

Our implementation of the ECE-8 conversion is still in its early stages. But the beginning is where much of the learning takes place. Each phase will present new challenges and opportunities. We are sharing our experiences to date as a service to other schools undertaking the same challenge of transitioning to an ECE-8 program.

We will focus on three issues we grappled with during our first year of implementation:

- planning for space and materials;
- understanding middle school students and their needs;
- analyzing and implementing the middle school curriculum.

Cindy Ziegler, a middle grades math teacher at Bryant Webster ECE-8 School, imparts a lesson.



Planning for Space and Materials

Like everything in education, ECE-8 conversions require creative planning for optimal use of space and materials. As we began planning our conversion, we wondered how we could possibly fit three more grades inside our lovely old school.

Students in grades 6 through 8 are not assigned to Bryant Webster, but must choose to come here. This allows us to cap class size at 25 students. Also, when the ECE-8 rollout is complete, the school will have just two classrooms per grade level from early childhood education through grade 8.

This will allow us to fit in our building – and in our classrooms. It would be difficult to squeeze more than 25 growing middle school-aged students, along with desks, chairs, books and computers into an elementary-sized classroom.

Adding a grade level requires new materials, furniture and equipment. We spent over \$50,000 on materials to create the sixth grade.

We carefully chose science and social studies textbooks that were well formatted and aligned to state and national standards. We read and analyzed every district-approved program until we found the one that would work the best for us.

We needed to purchase the district math program, classroom library books, a variety of reading materials, dry erase boards and bookcases. We had to look at all district-required curriculum and make sure that we had the materials

needed to deliver that curriculum. This required some new gym equipment and a computerized keyboarding program.

Not everything went perfectly. One example: we had to order new desks in October to fit the students. Initially, we thought the old elementary schools desks we had would work. Within a couple of months, however, the students had outgrown them.

Indeed, we learned something new every day during the first year.

We also needed to revise the school schedule. We had to find a way to offer elective classes to our sixth graders. This is challenging at a school like ours, where the staff is small. We found a way to offer our seventh and eighth graders two elective classes; the sixth graders will have one.

We also had to devise a classroom schedule different from the ECE-5 schedule. We wanted our students to know that sixth grade is different. They needed to be prepared to answer to more than one teacher and manage multiple assignments. Therefore, beginning with sixth grade, the students switched between two classroom teachers and two elective teachers.

As eighth graders in 2006, they will switch among four classroom teachers and two elective teachers. This should help prepare them for the logistical challenges of navigating through a large high school.

The challenge in organizing an ECE-8 environment is the range of ages grouped together under one roof. The connection between the older and younger students can be a great benefit if done well.

To ensure that the students enjoyed positive interactions, we created a strong classroom management and character development plan. We wanted the sixth-grade students to understand that they were older now, and with that came privileges and responsibilities.

We expect our middle grades students to behave professionally, maturely, and as role models for the younger children. When older students display the correct attributes, they are accorded privileges. When they forget or choose not to display the attributes, they lose privileges.

For example, we can't disrupt other classes when our students switch from one classroom to another. We had to teach them to make the transition quietly – no small feat for 12- and 13-year-olds. We developed what we termed,

Hallway Freedom. Hallway Freedom is earned by demonstrating the maturity to move along hallways quietly and expeditiously. Once students can do this without disrupting other classes, they earn the right to do it independently.

To be effective, and survive, we must work, plan, and teach as a team. This allows us to maintain and enforce common expectations. The rules don't change from classroom to classroom. The expectations are consistent. A great deal of planning time is required to make this work. We have a common planning time during the day, but we also meet daily before school, at lunch, and after school. We often tie up loose ends over our cell phones on the way home.

The key to success with middle school students is working together. It is easier to meet their ever-changing needs as a team.

Meeting the Needs of the Students

Our students are the driving force behind this change. How can we best meet their needs? How can we work smart every day to produce successful high school and college-bound students, who can overcome obstacles that might cause them to stumble on their path to success? What changes can we anticipate in the students, as they move into puberty, that may affect the middle grades as well as the younger students and staff at Bryant Webster? These questions were paramount as planning began midway through the 2003-2004 school year.

We started by reading extensively about young adolescents. What struck us immediately was the intense focus on peers among early teens. Many of our reading materials suggested ways to incorporate this focus into the curriculum.

As a result, many of the learning activities and positive reinforcement ideas we developed were performed

with partners, or in groups. We felt confident this would address some of their social fixations. Still, what we were not prepared for was the vital importance of friendships in their lives. The kids literally hang on one another whenever they get a chance.

We also came to recognize the importance of note-writing in their daily connections to one another. We worked on getting the students focused on academics first, but note-writing was something we failed to eradicate completely.

A wonderful aspect of adding

ships was one of the first dramatic changes we noticed. These relationships endured for, at most, a week, and often ended within a day.

These breakups devastated some of the students involved. We are not counselors, but we spent a part of each day trying to mediate social crises so that they wouldn't interfere with academics.

Finally, chronic absences have been a problem for a small group of sixth graders. We have enlisted our social worker to help with this, but she is only at our school two days per week.

Another challenging aspect is providing a middle grades curriculum that is not just an extended elementary school experience.

middle grades to a formerly ECE-5 school is the older students' thirst for knowledge and ability to engage in higher level thinking. As they worked on research papers and oral presentations in science and social studies, everything they learned led to another question.

With a solid classroom management system in place, the students were able to show off to other teachers, principals, and visitors their critical thinking abilities. One example of this occurred when we went to the Denver Museum of Nature and Science to visit an ancient Egypt exhibit. Museum visitors were so impressed with the students' studious demeanor that one even wrote a letter to our school. Another called to praise the students.

Although adding sixth grade has been mostly positive for Bryant Webster, nothing is perfect and problems arose. One surprise was the drama of middle school life.

Certainly, we can recall our own middle school experiences, but we didn't anticipate the extent to which their juvenile soap opera lives would interfere with their academic lives. The flowering of boy/girl relation-

These kinds of issue seem to intensify as students get older. We have kept in close contact with parents, but the ones we need to work with most do not follow through and are sometimes part of the problem.

Converting an elementary school to an ECE-8 is not an easy task, but the students make it worthwhile. It has been fascinating for us to learn more about adolescents, and to see the growth in the children that have been at Bryant Webster since kindergarten.

Schoolwide, the staff and teachers have been amazed watching our sixth graders. Change should be even more significant as we add seventh and eighth grade over the next two years.

One lesson we learned that other new ECE-8 schools should heed is that schools with older kids need additional support, mainly in the form of counseling.

Middle School Curriculum

Another challenging aspect to the transition is providing a middle grades curriculum that is not just an extended elementary school experience.

One of the key facets of our program is the curriculum we teach. The curriculum needs to be appropriate, challenging and interesting. As teachers we have a variety of curriculum documents from which to work. The first step in creating our instructional plan was to gather and consolidate information from a variety of middle grades curriculum documents.

Denver Public Schools uses five different curriculum guides: the NCEE Performance Standards for Middle Schools, New Standards, the Colorado Model Content Standards, the Sixth Grade CSAP Frameworks, and the Denver Public Schools Curriculum Matrices.

We created a master document that combined all these curriculum guides. Once we had the information gathered in one place, we looked at the big picture. This brought into focus what students would be expected to know by the end of eighth grade.

From there, we detailed the skills and strategies that would lay the foundation for reaching the desired outcome. Next, we plotted the skills onto a calendar, showing what material would be covered week by week. These were our sixth-grade instructional plans. We followed these plans to make sure we were delivering a high quality, standards-based curriculum that would prepare the students to be successful in college.

Knowing state standards well allowed us to find the best places to incorporate the use of technology and research skills. We wanted our students to become proficient in the use of web-based research tools, an essential skill in our evolving information economy.

Using the standards, we connected science and social studies content to research reports. We focused our students on learning to read, write about, and analyze nonfiction writing. Nonfiction is the most widely read genre, and often the most often overlooked.

ROCHESTER: WHEN IN DOUBT AXE MIDDLE SCHOOLS

BY ALAN GOTTLIEB

Today, middle schools no longer exist in the Rochester landscape. Gone as well are traditional high schools. In their place are schools with a variety of grade configurations, with most schools building toward either pre-kindergarten through sixth grade or seventh through twelfth.

ECE-8

Conversions are growing in popularity

Research on the subject is not highly compelling, but urban school districts across the nation have been caught up in a wave of ECE-8 school conversions over the past five years.

Most districts have taken the plunge for two reasons: first, the ECE-8 model is far more popular with parents than the traditional, large middle school. Second, local data in most of these cities demonstrates that middle grades students perform better in smaller environments.

Despite the fact that much credible research shows that it's the quality of implementation that matters, rather than grade configuration, the national pendulum is swinging increasingly away from middle schools and toward ECE-8s.

ROCHESTER, NY – On a flight to Denver to attend a 2002 conference, three key Rochester, N.Y. school officials sketched a radical reconfiguration plan for their district on airline cocktail napkins.

It's emblematic of this city's unusually collaborative relationships that among the three were the recently appointed superintendent of schools and the president of the local teachers' union.

"We agreed we couldn't continue to operate the same way," Rochester Supt. Manuel Rivera recalled of the strategic huddle on the west-bound jet. "So we decided we had to change grade configurations to eliminate middle schools."

Rivera's co-conspirators were Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski, and C. Michael Robinson, a high-ranking district official who has worked in the school district for over 30 years.

Today, Rivera wishes he had hung onto those napkins, because the sketches paved the way for what has emerged as one of the nation's most ambitious secondary school reform initiatives.

Huge infusions of cash from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation over the past four years have sparked high school reform efforts across the country. In Rochester, however -- which has received

over \$5 million from Gates -- the reform is being driven by a crisis in the middle grades.

"Middle schools were never conceived to hold more than 400 or 500 kids," Robinson said recently. "But we had five big middle schools of over 1,000 kids each. It's almost immoral to have that many pre-adolescents in one place."

Today, middle schools no longer exist in the Rochester landscape. Gone as well are traditional high schools. In their place are schools with a variety of grade configurations, with most schools building toward either pre-kindergarten through sixth grade or seventh through twelfth.

"The bottom line for us was eliminating that critical transition (from elementary to middle school)," Rivera said.

The Rochester City School District is New York's poorest, with over 80 percent of its students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. Sixty-four percent of its 34,000 students are African American. In many ways, Rochester exemplifies the challenges urban school districts face, especially in the industrial northeast.

When Rivera took the helm in Rochester, middle schools posed the greatest challenge. In 2000-01, just 16 percent of the city's middle

Here is what has been happening in some cities across the country:

Baltimore: ECE-8 schools have been gaining in popularity over the past decade. The city school system now has 22 6-8 grade middle schools and 23 ECE-8s. Officials report fewer disciplinary problems and higher achievement in the ECE-8 schools.

Boston: By 2007, the number of ECE-8 schools in Boston will increase to 25 from the current 12. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, 15 of the 18 traditional middle schools in Boston have been identified as needing improvement. Only two of the dozen ECE-8 schools fall into that category.

grades students met standards for their grade level, based on standardized tests. Over one-third of sixth graders that year scored in the lowest category on state tests.

Clearly, change had to happen, and not incremental, tinker-around-the-margins change.

“Middle school achievement was deplorable; there’s no other way to say it,” Rivera said. “Middle schools had the highest percentage turnover of teachers – 30 to 40 percent per year in some schools. Attendance was poor. The schools were overcrowded.

“It got so bad, some parents used it as a reason to pull their kids out of the system after fifth grade.”

So the cocktail napkin sketching ensued. And no one wanted the changes to be modest.

“I hate the word reform,” said Dennis Francione, principal of the Franklin Education Campus, a former high school that completed its transition to a 7-12 school during the 2004-05 school year. “What are we going to reform, failure? We have been failing, locally and nationally. What we need to do is restructure, reinvent. That’s what we’re doing here.”

Franklin and other 7-12 Rochester schools are placing students in small learning communities grouped by age. Students in grades seven through nine attend

“Foundation Academies,” and 10th through 12th graders attend “Commencement Academies.”

Larger schools have two of each type of academy. This allows clusters of four or five teachers to work with a small group of students over three years. At Franklin, each student also is assigned to an “advisory class” of no more than 12 students, which meets three times a week. Students stay in the same advisory



Students enrolled in the Global Media School at Rochester’s Franklin Education Campus crowd behind the news desk in the school’s television studio.

seventh graders he occasionally confronts in the halls.

“We’re doing the mentor thing here,” he said as he opened his locker between periods. “We show them by our behavior how they got to calm down. They glorify violence, and I say to them ‘you don’t have to do that.’ And they seem to listen.”

Francione said data supports the effectiveness of the reconfiguration in fostering a more positive school culture. He pointed to

have made strong progress, especially in math and science. But Rivera and other administrators counsel patience, saying gains take time. And the reconfiguration is still rolling out, with full implementation in most schools slated for the 2005-06 school year.

“We’re still struggling to make a difference inside the classroom,” Robinson acknowledged. “So we’re taking a closer look at instruction.”

There’s still much to be done, Rivera acknowledged, and the district can’t do it alone.

“If we went into this thing thinking grade configuration change would be the be-all and end-all, that would be a stupid thing to do,” he said. “To make this work, you have to build partnerships, and going about that systematically takes time.”

The key partnership was with Urbanski and the Rochester Teachers Association. Urbanski and his union chapter are widely viewed as perhaps the most progressive teachers association in the nation. Urbanski has a long history of working collaboratively with district leadership.

“Basically, in working for this configuration change, we wanted to cut our biggest losses – middle schools,” Urbanski said. “In my experience, a large, successful middle school is an oxymoron. It’s masochistic to try it.” ❖

class until graduation.

Even though students in the older grades are largely separate from the younger students, opportunities for mentoring and role-modeling do occur.

Brandon, a 12th grader in Rochester’s East High School Teaching and Learning Institute, said he tries to set a good example for the often whacky

improvements in attendance rates – up from 86 percent two years ago to 92 percent in 2004-05 – and a sharp decline in suspensions as evidence that the new configuration meets the needs of teens more effectively.

Student achievement gains are not as evident. The brightest spots are in elementary grades, where students

Cincinnati: All 59 former elementary schools are now ECE-8s. The conversion process began after a 1991 pilot program showed fewer disciplinary problems and better attendance at six converted ECE-8s than at traditional middle schools.

Cleveland: A wholesale conversion, started in 1999 with four schools, is now nearly complete.

Twenty-nine new ECE-8 schools joined the existing 22 in the fall of 2004. District Chief Executive Officer Barbara Byrd-Bennett attributed the shift to “a groundswell from the community.” No conversion could proceed without approval from at least 75 percent of the school’s parents.

New York: ECE-8 conversions – 15 occurred in 2004-05 alone – are

part of a larger restructuring that will create 200 small schools of varying configurations.

Philadelphia: Currently, about one-third of the city’s middle gradus students attend ECE-6, ECE-7 or ECE-8 schools. The district hopes to have “a vast majority” of those students in ECE-8s by 2008.

Studies of the district showed that students who attended ECE-8 schools scored better on standardized tests, got better grades in 9th grade, and were admitted to selective high schools at greater rates than their traditional middle school peers.

PAINS

TRIUMPHS AND CHALLENGES IN AN ECE-8 CONVERSION

By PETER SHERMAN

When the dismissal bell rings at 3 p.m., students begin streaming out of the doors at Park Hill ECE-8 school in northeast Denver. Many three- to four-foot tall first- and second-grade students look for their waiting parents in our courtyard, excited to tell them about the art project they completed during the day.

Through the same doors also emerge, more forcefully, five- to six-foot tall seventh- and eighth-grade students, eager to continue the basketball game from lunch, discuss their latest crushes, or find their friends before heading home.

This scene captures many of the benefits and challenges of the ECE-8 model.

Some Background

In 2000, parents from Park Hill Elementary School proposed a structural change for their school to the Denver Public Schools Board of Education. They wanted the ECE-5 school to grow and extend to serve sixth- through eighth- grade students as well. Parents were interested in creating another option for their children for the middle school years.

Citing evidence and research about ECE-8 models, the parents argued, successfully, that such a model at Park Hill would offer students middle school education within the setting and culture of the more intimate elementary school.

Park Hill opened its doors to sixth graders in the fall of 2002 and celebrated its first eighth-grade graduation ceremony in

May of 2005.

In the spring of 2005, the school board decided to launch a major expansion of the ECE-8 model. During the 2004-05 school year, six schools followed this model. When the 2005-06 school year started, 16 schools were either full ECE-8s or were adding a grade en-route to full conversion.

Principal's Challenges

Perhaps my experiences as an ECE-8 principal can be instructive to principals who suddenly find themselves in a similar position.

I was appointed principal of Park Hill in July 2003, the year after the first sixth-grade class began. A first-time building leader, I followed a strong and experienced principal.

As a new principal, I was busy learning about my new position within a well-established school with a strong staff. Meanwhile, teachers were establishing a new seventh grade.

The collective goals and vision for the ECE-8 transition were general and lacked an articulated commitment by staff and parents, other than those found in the original proposal. The original goals included: improving the continuity of teaching and learning; fostering better social development of our students; and improving academic performance.

As the transition unfolded, the school was simultaneously trying to redefine an "international studies" theme established a decade earlier. Over time, the theme

lost its funding; commitment to it withered, and Park Hill had become an international studies school in name only.

Amid all of these changes, it became even more important to assess and plan for curriculum, culture, parental involvement and organization of the new Park Hill School.

I brought with me my own experiences and ideas that, during the past two years, I have begun to articulate and assert. Among them:

- an ECE-8 school offers many opportunities to create multi-age relationships, a well-articulated curriculum and common assessment strategies.
- ECE-8 schools should structure ways for younger and older students to genuinely and regularly interact socially and academically. Carefully designed rituals and routines within classrooms and the whole school can guide the school culture in a positive direction.
- ECE-8 schools also should include assessment practices that require public, multi-age presentations of learning by students – practices that build academic and social community.

Transition Challenges

Challenges abound within the transition from an elementary to an ECE-8 model. The most obvious is the need for fundamental organizational, cultural and academic change amid the already stressful process of operating a school.

One of our goals has been to



A variety of experiences helps keep Park Hill's middle grades students engaged.

create one unified school, rather than an elementary and middle school within the same building. Yet each level of the school must have unique programmatic, age-appropriate opportunities.

More superficially, school titles, signage and terminology are important aspects of redefining a school identity. As a result, we call our sixth through eighth grades "upper grades" rather than middle school.

Many of these students want their student ID cards to read "Park Hill Middle School;" we have had to negotiate with students on some issues. Adolescent students have strong feelings about identity issues and we strive to create a culture for them that feels special and unique from the lower-grade students, but one that is not separate.

We have to consider carefully our expectations about behavior, academic rigor, rules – even lunchroom food – and how we communicate them to students. We want our older students to model appropriate behavior for our younger students even though they have very different needs.

We hold dances and offer after-school competitive athletics and elective classes for our upper-grade students. Younger students are keenly aware of and closely observe the ways older students act, speak, play and sometimes fight.

These relationships are key to the culture of an ECE-8 school and can be enhanced through a wide

array of cross-age experiences.

One of our enrollment goals is that our upper school consist entirely of students who came up through the Park Hill elementary grades. However, in the first year of our transition, many Park Hill parents and students chose to attend other middle schools.

As a result, we have filled our spots with students from traditional middle schools, for whom

tion based on many factors. Until last

year, three separate equations existed for elementary, middle and high schools. The ECE-8 principals successfully lobbied for the creation of an ECE-8 equation to support the unique needs of this model.

The district's ECE-8 budgeting model includes some funding for supplemental teachers, a student advisor/guidance counselor, an assistant principal and some

One of our goals has been to create one unified school, rather than an elementary and middle school within the same building.

a more intimate class size and a two-teacher block schedule is more appealing than the six or seven classes of a larger middle school. Managing an influx of students from other schools and school cultures, while trying to define ours, has been a challenge.

Enrollment patterns show that more and more Park Hill students will stay on after fifth grade and will eventually fill our upper grades. Marketing to our own population is critical. This continuity will allow us to establish and promote a strong and unique ECE-8 school culture with clear expectations.

School budgets in DPS are determined by a complex equa-

tion based on many factors. The district has also supported the transition through extra, one-time funds for instructional materials, furniture and training. Park Hill received about \$50,000 over several years in supplemental funds.

These special allowances for ECE-8 schools have been helpful in developing a school-wide culture, because our upper-grade students require different types of services than are typically available in elementary schools.

Teacher Requirements

Successful upper-grade ECE-8 teachers must:

- be qualified to teach multiple subjects;

- be willing to teach in block schedules;
- establish relationships with students that are more characteristic of elementary school relationships than middle or high school relationships.

Furthermore, these transition years require the kind of energy and creativity from teachers commonly required in start-up schools.

We tap into the skills and interests of our upper-school teachers to offer a wide-array of elective courses, including Spanish, business, algebra, physics of aviation, drama, and journalism.

The transition has also proved challenging for elementary teachers. Whether they favored or opposed the transition to the ECE-8 model, teachers had to adapt to a changing school culture and changing priorities. Having older, larger students around can be daunting, and reforming habits to collaborate and plan with upper-grade teachers may also be challenging for some teachers.

District Support

Since arriving at Park Hill, I have met monthly with principals of the other ECE-8 schools in DPS. For over a year, we were an intimate group of six, sharing ideas, challenges and strategies. In October 2004, our group expanded to include another 12 principals from schools transitioning to this model.

This changed the nature of our group. District officials took a

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“ELEMIDDLE” SCHOOLS: MIDDLE GRADES DONE RIGHT

By DAVID L. HOUGH



The question that has plagued educational policy makers for years is how to group students too mature for elementary school and too immature for secondary school to maximize their potential for success in school.

Should they be in a junior high school housing grades 7-8 or 7-9; a middle school housing grades 5-8 or 6-8; a high school housing grades 7-12; or in some configuration more aligned to the elementary school? While the necessarily equivocal answer is “It depends,” a growing body of research indicates that a specific type of ECE-8 school, what I call the “elemiddle” school, may be the best answer.

For the past 40 years or more, scholars have noted and attempted to explain the changing demographics relative to school grade-span configurations. But merely counting the number of schools that have changed their grade-span configurations doesn't tell us anything about what program changes are taking place within those schools, nor in which type of school young adolescents are learning best.

Too many schools have changed their grade configurations to 6-8 and called themselves middle schools without substantively changing their programs, policies, practices, instructional processes, or curricula.

A recent study of research conducted over the last dozen years indicates that the key question regarding the impact of middle grades education on student achievement has yet to be addressed on the national level.

Although much of the current body of information is a product

of self-reporting by individual schools and school districts, data often documents improved student achievement for middle-grades students attending ECE-8 elemiddle schools. In addition, research indicates a significantly higher level of middle-level programs, policies, and practices in ECE-8 than in 6-8 schools.

“We've Been Doing That for Years.”

You can't effectively create change and implement middle-level programs if the people doing the work don't believe in them. The most effective curriculum is the one teachers buy into. 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.

For example, many career elementary school teachers when they first learn of middle school programs, policies, and practices, are quick to say, “We've been doing that for years.” Integrating subject matter, as well as learner outcomes and objectives, into thematic units; promoting intramural sports; advising students; exploring nontraditional subject matter; and meeting with other teachers on a regular basis to plan, and present instruction to a common group of students are all promising middle school practices that are familiar to many elementary school teachers.

Perhaps it is easier to implement these middle school concepts in ECE-8 elemiddle schools because

the climate for teaching both children and adolescents is already in place. A program that maintains stability of student attrition across grade levels and sustains a nurturing environment can help students make the transition from childhood to young adolescence at various stages between grades 4 and 8.

Addressing this transition without changing schools is a significant strength of the ECE-8 elemiddle school. More opportunities exist to match developmentally appropriate instruction with a critical mass of students across grade levels.

Another strength of the ECE-8 schools is the ease with which some middle-level practices can be implemented. For example, many eighth graders not reading at grade level have shown improvement as a result of having tutored a student in a lower grade, say the fourth or fifth. This type of cross-age tutoring can be easily accomplished and supervised when the students are in the same ECE-8 building.

Teacher teaming across grade levels is another middle-level concept that most teachers in ECE-8 schools tend to accept. In fact, having a common time to plan together for instruction is considered a perk by many teachers, who have very little planning time during the school day in a traditional elementary school.

What Principals Need to Know

Principals of ECE-8 and middle schools would be well advised to learn, understand, and apply middle-level education programs, practices, and policies for students

ages 10 to 14. Also, make sure that your staff, parents, and communities understand what the middle school concept actually entails. Whenever possible, make every effort to hire teachers who have been trained to teach young adolescents. Those holding elementary and/or middle school teaching certification should be given priority over those holding secondary school certification.

Principals need to understand that young adolescents mature at vastly different rates and at different stages between grades 4 and 10. Some fourth- and fifth-grade students may be ready for departmentalized classrooms while some sixth and seventh graders are not.

Transitioning students from classrooms designed for children to those designed for young adolescents cannot be done effectively by treating all students as though they develop physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively at the same rates. Principals should not only recognize and appreciate the stages of human growth and development that constitute young adolescence, they should also take the lead in helping students, parents, and teachers celebrate it. ❖

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from THE EDITOR

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new “elemiddle” schools join six others that have been around for between one and 10 years.

This issue of *The Term Paper* focuses on the challenges and benefits of changing the grade-level configuration of a middle grades school.

In a nutshell, experts agree that configuration matters less than implementation. But for reasons researchers have yet to pinpoint, effective middle grades practices appear more frequently in ECE-8 schools than in traditional middle schools.

One reason may be structural. Generally, ECE-8 schools have a smaller, more intimate environment of several hundred students spanning ages 4 through 14. In traditional middle schools, up to 1,200 young adolescents navigate the crowded hallways.

In other words, traditional middle schools must cut against the grain to create *small learning communities*, while such communities exist naturally within ECE-8 schools.

Positive findings about “elemiddle” schools offer reasons for hope and concern as Denver ramps up its conversion process.

- **Hope**, because if the conversions are handled well, the persistent challenge urban middle schools pose could be effectively addressed here.
- **Concern**, because early signs raise questions about the quality of implementation within DPS. And implementation is the whole ballgame.

DPS has formed a cohort of new and longer-term ECE-8 principals. The group has held regular meetings over the past year, to discuss issues around implementing the conversions.

While principals say the meetings

are helpful, some privately acknowledge that they are worried, because the sessions tend to focus on logistics rather than vital questions of instruction and school culture.

Bryant Webster ECE-8 school offers a model for effective implementation of a grade-level reconfiguration. As teachers Tami Taylor and Cindy Zeigler detail in this issue, a successful conversion requires painstakingly detailed planning.

Bryant Webster received private funding from The Piton Foundation to allow Taylor and Ziegler to put in extra hours developing lesson plans; linkages between fifth- and sixth-grade curriculum; discipline policies, and countless other details.

The 10 schools that began their conversions this year have not had that extra help. What’s more, while Bryant Webster and other, earlier-generation ECE-8s grew out of community-based advocacy, the 10 new conversions resulted from central-office decisions based in part on logistics and competition from charter schools.

Buy-in and enthusiasm fuel the Herculean effort required to make the home-grown conversions successful. Less clear is whether the centrally mandated conversions create the necessary level of energy and commitment among teachers and principals. This is hardly a recipe for success.

Still, despite the challenges, DPS has created an excellent opportunity for improvement of middle-grades education. A solid professional development and implementation plan, adequately funded with district dollars and private grants, will help guarantee the success of this bold initiative. But there’s no time to lose. ❖

– Alan Gottlieb, Editor

(GROWING PAINS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7)

lead role to coordinate the addition of more schools. The expanded group met each week to share knowledge and create a professional development plan. Principals of transitioning schools visited current ECE-8 schools.

In its first year, the principals group focused on critical issues related to launching new ECE-8 schools:

- scheduling and calendars;
- curriculum and programming;
- effective learning environments for adolescent students;
- enrollment and marketing;
- elements and practices of current ECE-8 schools.

The principals group has proved valuable. We have had to advocate for ourselves and our schools, within the central administration as well as with other building administrators.

The district has used the principals group meetings to provide support for the logistical challenges of expanding the model. It will, however, be critical for the district to assist principals and teachers as they work to create ECE-8 schools that capitalize on the academic and social benefits of the model.

Designing meaningful professional development focused on instruction and school culture is a challenge that will require creativity and commitment from district officials. It is essential for the long-term success of the ECE-8 model in DPS.

Remaining Challenges

At Park Hill, we have overcome the initial challenges of adding upper grades to our school. Many other challenges remain.

We continue to struggle to create opportunities for parents to be involved in their children’s learning, especially parents of the upper-grade students. As we establish and maintain rules and expectations that work for all students aged four through fourteen, we must also rethink how we build and nurture a positive and celebratory school culture for all of the students.

Working with teachers on designing curriculum that provides a rigorous, exciting and coherent experience for students remains an ongoing challenge of our professional development program.

Finally, financial resources are always limited and we must make difficult decisions about how to meet the varying needs of our students.

Despite all the challenges, when the morning bell rings at 8:15, our students will arrive, excited, we hope, about the day. ❖

Peter Sherman is in his third year as principal of the Park Hill ECE-8 school in northeast Denver.

the **termpaper**

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ECE-8s ARE NO PANACEA

By HAYES MIZELL

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 ontime, and most of them are clean and safe. 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."

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. 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.

While separate middle schools with these grade configurations prevail, a growing number of urban school systems are turning away from this model. When

Having fouled their own nests through neglect and mismanagement of middle schools, these school systems now want to convert to ECE-8 in the hope that they can achieve better results with less effort.

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.

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.

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 ECE-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. 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 21st century. They believe that converting from 6-8 schools to

ECE-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.

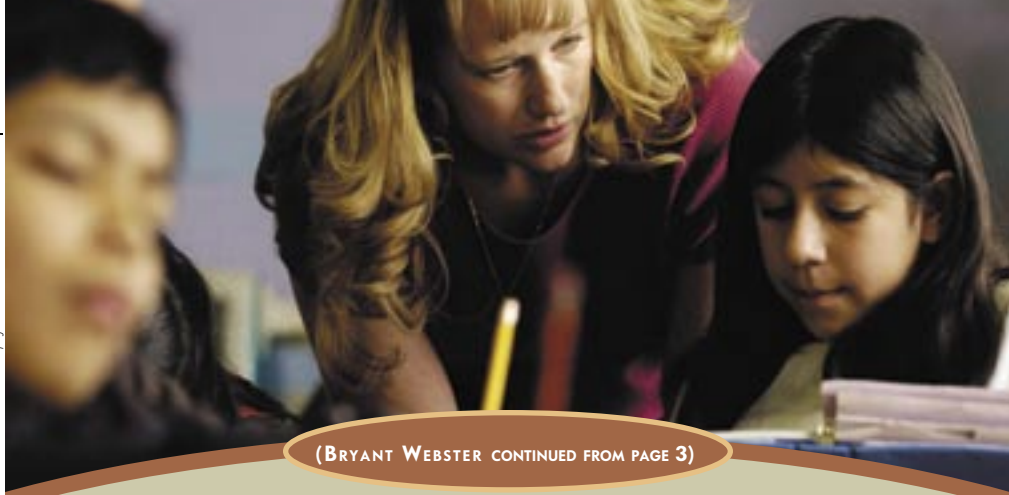
The motives of other school systems may be less altruistic. Having fouled their own nests through neglect and mismanagement of middle schools, these school systems now want to convert to an

ECE-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 ECE-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 ECE-8 schools will solve many problems, but school boards and superintendents need to know that the wholesale conversion to an ECE-8 structure is not a matter of "set it and forget it."

Under any grade configuration, educating young adolescents well is hard work. Whether young adolescents are in 6-8 or ECE-8 schools, they need engaging, challenging curricula and high quality



teaching rooted in knowledge of subject content. Students in ECE-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 satisfied, 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 ECE-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 ECE-8 and 6-8 schools, but there is no shortage of information and models for how to educate youth effectively in the middle grades, regardless of the configuration. In addition, both ECE-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.

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.

Excerpted from Mizell, H. (2005). Still crazy after all these years: Grade configuration and the education of young adolescents. Middle School Journal, 37 (1), 5-xx. For a more complete discussion of this issue, please consult the Middle School Journal's theme issue "Where Best to Educate Young Adolescents: ECE-8 Settings or Separate Schools?", vol. 37, no. 1, September 2005.

Hayes Mizell, a distinguished senior fellow at the New York-based Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, has published extensively on grade-level configuration and middle school reform.

(BRYANT WEBSTER CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3)

Nonfiction reading and writing connected well to the students' growing hunger for knowledge. This was the first time some of our students were able to find information for themselves. Instead of waiting for the teacher to provide the information, they learned to go out into the world and find it.

The goal is to help them develop independence, so that when they reach high school and are asked to create a research report, they will be able to do it.

Our curriculum and instruction heavily emphasized reading. At the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year, just 20 percent of our students read at or above grade level. Some were a few years below grade level, others were reading in English for the first time.

The students must learn to read at grade level. We refuse to send them to high school reading below grade level. They will never reach their goals without being able to read proficiently. Therefore, our reading program differs from the traditional DPS middle school reading program, in that we have shared and guided reading daily.

Shared reading is where we all have a copy of the same text, read it together and discuss aspects of the book such as dynamic and static characters, plot development, and symbolism. We are teaching the students that, especially in a novel, much of the information is implicit and you must read actively to find it.

Guided reading consists of a small group of students (approximately six) who read at the same level. This is where the skills and strategies taught in shared reading are practiced and developed.

We also offer literature circles for students who read above grade level. In literature circles, the students read additional works by the authors of the shared reading texts. This allows them to compare literary techniques such as mood, themes and style.

We work hard to keep the curriculum challenging. Every time students read a book, we expect them to understand and see more in it. Each research report becomes more difficult to write than the last, because the required text structure changes. Every

piece of written work is expected to show better use of vocabulary, figurative literature, and control of grammar. We want to open their eyes to the world of academia – the world of their future.

Final Thoughts

We are dedicated to creating a strong, well-organized, rigorous academic environment in which our students will thrive and grow. They need an environment where they are safe; free to take risks and learn about the world outside their own neighborhood.

The Bryant Webster community as a whole believes that the best way to create such an environment is to become an ECE-8 school. Our hope is that with a smaller community of students than a conventional middle school, we can push our middle graders to succeed. No one will fall through the cracks because the cracks won't exist.

Our goal in the next couple of years will be to teach our students how to compete with their peers, and to market the students to outstanding high school programs. We will work hard every day and every year to make sure that students learn and are ready to succeed. We will do our best to teach every child so that they love to learn.

At the end of the year, one of our students wrote, "I forgot to thank you for this year. It was my favorite of all my years. Also, my mom said thank you both for believing in me and not giving up on me. THANK YOU!"

Moments like that kept us going through the crazy transition process. In the end, it's always about the kids.

This story continues to unfold. The biggest challenges still lie ahead. We look forward to them.

But here's something we're not looking forward to: the day our students leave us for high school. We'll be proud, yes, but sad as well.

We can only hope that success follows them wherever they go. ❖

Tami Taylor and Cindy Ziegler are middle grades teachers at Bryant Webster School in northwest Denver.

For a detailed examination of the best practices

in middle grades education, see The Term Paper,

Issue 4 at the Piton Foundation web site:

<http://www.piton.org/Admin/Article/TermPaper.May2003.qrk.pdf>

**News & Analysis
on Urban School Reform
from The Piton Foundation**



Ten years have passed since Denver came out from under a federal court school desegregation order. The Piton Foundation has commissioned a major study from the Harvard University Civil Rights Project on student achievement in Denver since the end of busing. The January 2006 issue will focus on the study's findings.

the **term***paper*

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