

# The great K-8 debate

by Keith Look

A growing body of research shows **K-8 schools to be effective in improving student achievement in the middle grades.**

Data collected in Philadelphia show **students from K-8 schools performing better** on standardized tests and displaying higher GPAs in ninth grade than students from middle schools.

The School District's "Empowerment Plan," drawn up to meet state requirements for improving student test scores, says the system will convert middle schools to K-8 schools "where feasible."

## **Does the K-8 school solve all the problems of middle grades education?**

The School District of Philadelphia's recent push for K-8 schools reflects a national trend, particularly in urban communities.

Like most "hot" educational reforms, the K-8 school may mistakenly be touted as a silver bullet. The truth remains that silver bullets are only in the Lone Ranger's sidearm and Stephen King novels.

But K-8 schools are nowhere mentioned in the 1989 watershed Turning Points report on middle grades education or its sequel in 2000. Though there have been major shifts in state and local education policy to create K-8 schools in Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Harrisburg, Hartford, Palm Beach, and Phoenix, we are still awaiting published results of the impact of these reforms.

There is never a single, universal answer to education questions. The challenge becomes determining if, when, where, and how to apply K-8 schooling to Philadelphia's middle grades educational settings.

## **Why is the K-8 school re-emerging now?**

A school's grade configuration was once thought to be a permanent fixture of a school. The K-8 school - which dominated public education until the early 1900s - has returned to present day school reform conversations as one of a number of middle grades interventions (such as "looping", "teaming", and "advisories") aimed at addressing questions that trouble middle grades educators, researchers, and policy-makers:

- How can schools increase academic rigor in the middle grades?
- What school conditions are necessary to support adolescent identity development?
- What interventions aid students' transitions between grades and between schools?
- What role do race, class, and gender play in answering these questions?

The answers to these questions demonstrate as many alternative philosophies as years of debate.

By the early twentieth century, the little red K-8 schoolhouse with its single classroom and school-marm seemed unable to address the learning needs of adolescents. The historic Committee of Ten endorsed the potential of the junior high school as a more effective structure than the K-8 school to increase rigor and boost middle grades student achievement.

Other groups advocated for K-6 elementary schools followed by combination 7-12 junior-senior high schools. In some instances, schools rejected grade configuration changes entirely and remained K-8. Others pursued yet another design by extending the K-8 school to educate grades K-12.

In the School District of Philadelphia, schools using all these different grade configurations are functioning today.

### **Why else might districts and communities pursue K-8 schools?**

Not all movements in favor of K-8 schools emerge from discussions of student achievement or adolescent development. Nationally, **some districts find K-8 schools to be less expensive** to operate than simultaneously running elementary and middle schools. Other districts convert to K-8 schools to address perceptions of unruly behavior in the middle schools.

Some residential communities turned **towards K-8 schools as a means to create true neighborhood schools. The local K-8 school allowed families to avoid sending children across informal boundaries to the middle school**, which serves a broader geographical area.

Other communities sought K-8 schools as a way to preserve racial and/or economic segregation.

### **What does the national research say?**

Current national research on K-8 schools may be a shallow body of literature, but **consistent, positive findings surface while wading through it**. In a number of published studies comparing K-8 schools to junior high schools in Milwaukee and New York City, **K-8 schools outperform junior high schools in almost every category assessed**.

In the 1970s, Milwaukee researchers Simmons and Blyth studied over 600 students beginning in the sixth grade and followed them through eighth grade. During this three-year period, some students transitioned from a K-6 school into junior high school, while others remained in a K-8 school.

The researchers found that by the end of eighth grade, **students in the K-8 school showed higher self-esteem, less victimization by other students, greater levels of participation in extracurricular activities, and healthier adolescent development**.

In the 1980s, researcher Denis Moore replicated the Milwaukee study in New York City. His findings revealed similar advantages of K-8 schools over junior high schools.

Moore added the variable of reading achievement to his analysis. **Eighth grade reading scores of the students in the K-8 schools surpassed their counterparts in junior high schools**.

In both the Milwaukee and New York City studies, researchers selected K-8 and junior high schools that demonstrated similar levels of teacher education, racial composition, and economic means to anchor the validity of their comparisons.



entary is one of the School District's many long standing K-8 programs. The District is looking to create more K-8 schools. Photo by: Harvey Finkle

### **What does the local research say?**

In a Philadelphia study conducted in the 1990s, researcher Dr. Robert Offenberg used a different method of analysis to study a larger sample of K-8 and middle schools. A statistical technique known as multivariate regression allowed Offenberg to control for the effects of poverty and race while analyzing school performance and student achievement.

Offenberg's study yields positive results for Philadelphia's K-8 schools. **SAT-9 scores in reading, math, and science are significantly stronger in K-8 schools than in middle schools.** On the school Performance Index used during the Children Achieving era, **the edge that K-8 schools had over middle schools grew larger over a two-year period, particularly in math.**

Offenberg also compared the ninth grade performance of students from K-8 schools to students from middle schools. Results show the **percentage of students from K-8 schools who enroll in the special admit high schools to be more than 11% higher than the percentage of students from middle schools.**

**Students from the K-8 schools also demonstrate a higher Grade Point Average in ninth grade by approximately one-tenth of a letter grade.**

The Philadelphia study reveals an unanticipated finding as well. Offenberg discovered that as a school's number of students per grade (not the total number of students per school) increases, the performance of K-8 schools and middle schools becomes more similar. This finding suggests not only that grade configuration may be a factor in student achievement, but that the number of students per grade – which is often smaller in a K-8 school – carries significant impact.

### **Beyond statistics, what might be advantages of K-8 schools?**

Conversations with a number of Philadelphia principals suggest further advantages:

- **It is easier to fill vacancies in the middle grades of a K-8 school than in a middle school.**

- **A K-8 school is safer than a middle school because older children with younger family members attending the same school take on the part of protector, tutor, and role model. In a middle school, the same children must posture for a reputation, which often leads to the disruption associated with larger middle schools.**
- **Parental involvement is greater in K-8 schools because parents remain connected to one school longer and are more likely to have more than one family member enrolled in the school at the same time.**
- **In a K-8 school, younger and older siblings can travel to and from school together, avoiding the stress of elementary and middle schools beginning or ending at different times.**
- **School staff members feel more connected to the community because K-8 schools serve a smaller geographic area than a middle school. Staff members are able to see their influence as the students grow from small children into young adults under their supervision.**

One of the strongest cases for K-8 schools is one Catholic schools cite in maintaining most of their elementary schools as K-8 schools: more students are more well known by more adults.

The early grade teachers know almost every student in the building. Middle grades teachers can speak with any of them about students' histories, learning styles, and family dynamics. **These connections mean that each September teachers - and their students - do not start from square one.**

**From the student perspective, the continuity of K-8 schooling may reduce feelings of anonymity that can result in negative coping mechanisms such as fighting, displaying a "don't care" attitude, or self-destruction. Students can maintain relationships with past teachers they feel most connected with and find them when they need support, advice, or friendship.**

### **What drawbacks exist?**

In Philadelphia, the District classifies K-8 schools as "elementary" schools. In practice this means that the middle grades of a K-8 school are funded at a lower level than the middle grades of a middle school.

Unlike Philadelphia middle schools, K-8 schools are not automatically allocated an assistant principal or a school police officer. K-8 schools must squeeze money from a variety of sources to purchase these positions.

A K-8 school counselor, of whom there is usually one per elementary school, must deal with issues that span nine years of development rather than three or four in a middle school.

It is important to note that these drawbacks are not permanent conditions. They result from the District's formulas for school funding. A School District committee is investigating the potential inequities associated with resource allocation for K-8 schools and related issues such as professional development and capital expenditures. (See page 14)

### **Are K-8 schools right for Philadelphia?**

No grade configuration in and of itself replaces the ultimate importance of skilled teachers, visionary leaders, and equitable fiscal resources. Nor is there any single middle grades intervention that will solve the century-old questions of adolescent education.

But for some schools and communities, the K-8 configuration may work. It may be the catalyst that brings to fruition the middle grades learning environment that supports students' and staff members' pursuit of their potential.