

SOME FINDINGS ABOUT K-8 SCHOOLS

List member Keith Look is a researcher with the Philadelphia Education Fund. In this note to the MiddleWeb List (07/02), Keith shared some findings from his own experience and his dissertation research around the efficacy of K-8 schools.

Hey Folks,

The K-8 vs. junior high/ middle school issue has been a major issue for me the past few years. I was part of a project that attempted to convert a large struggling urban middle school and its 4 feeder elementary schools into 5 K-8 schools. We faced issues of curricula, budget, neighborhood boundaries, staffing, etc. There were lots of lessons learned. In fact, this became my dissertation recently completed.

So along the way, I've got a bibliography if any of you would be interested, as well as a history of grade span configurations in the US and a conclusion chapter that highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of K-8 schools and making the conversion into the model. In addition, there was an early article I wrote along the way which can be read online at:

<http://www.philaedfund.org/notebook/TheGreatK8Debate.htm>

Here are some highlights of what I've learned, experienced, etc:

1. K-8 schools may be a viable alternative to the large middle schools which struggle to be more than factory models of education
2. K-8 schools can enhance social capital and give at-risk students, in particular, greater opportunities at success by building relationships with staff over a course of nine years. This seems to be fueling, at least in part, the return of K-8 schools in urban and rural communities.
3. Parent involvement can improve because parents are usually happiest with their children's elementary school experiences, and therefore are more likely to stay involved in the children's school lives longer because they are already comfortable with the school and its staff AND because younger siblings/family enroll in the same bldg.
4. Middle grades students in a K-8 school behave differently than in a middle school. They take on the role of protector and role model as opposed to having to establish new reputations upon entering a middle school.
5. Absent from the Turning Points discussion, a K-8 school can incorporate a distinct, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate middle grades program within a K-8 grade span (one that includes all recommendations of Turning Points--both editions--from small learning environments to block scheduling, etc.).
6. Transitions to K-8 schools can enhance teacher collaboration and articulation within and across grades.
7. Internal accountability can increase in schools making the transition to K-8 b/c now teachers know personally who they are sending their children to next year, and middle grades teachers know who there students are coming from.
8. There's no substitute for effective leadership and good, committed teachers.
9. Districts have significant roles in supporting K-8 schools and conversions. In the district I worked with, major gaps in district-school alignment highlighted

what could/should be done to support K-8 schools.

My personal OPINION is that K-8 schools are a better option than a large middle school in low-resource communities. It is not a silver bullet, but another option that may be considered in attempting to bring about successful, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate middle grades education.

The benefits ARE NOT automatically inherent in the model, but -- as in any school model -- in the process by which the benefits are pursued--so as to avoid stretching the elementary model through 8th grade or like a middle school where the high school model has been pulled down). K-8 may make some of the benefits more easily attained in comparison to certain models in certain communiites.

If there is information I can provide or stories you'd like to hear, let me know. It would be nice for me to think that this stack of paper I produced might be of use to someone somewhere.

-- Keith Look
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