

Real Middle Schools: Good News on the *Horizon*?

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In March of 1999, middle level advocate and curriculum leader James A. Beane eloquently articulated what many middle level people were sensing and experiencing, that middle schools were “under siege” (Beane, 1999). In continuing the metaphor six years later, it appears that the battlements may be cracking and the castle door is succumbing to the battering ram. For example, in the March 3, 2004 edition of the New York Times, David Herszenhorn reported that many of the city’s middle schools would be eliminated in order to “re-create old style kindergarten-through-eighth-grade grammar schools and open new high schools for 6th to 12th graders” (p. 1). The proposed move by New York City follows similar reorganizations by Cincinnati, Baltimore, and Philadelphia (Viadero, 2004). Along these lines, a number of middle schools within a 60 mile radius of Springfield, IL have either planned to discontinue, or have dropped, advisory programs in favor of adopting test preparation periods designed to get students ready for the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT).

Political agendas arise in other ways, quite possibly through an imbalanced and a “less than the entire story” approach when discussing the complex issues surrounding middle schools. For instance, a recent headline in *Education Week* entitled: “Report Questions Wisdom of Separate Middle Schools” provided additional support for the K-8 and 6-12 grade reorganization moves that have been proposed and are occurring in some of our nation’s largest cities (Viadero, 2004). Especially alarming is the graph in this article - “Not Happy Places to Be”- showing that students from the United States were

at the bottom of a 12 country hierarchy when rating school climate. When coupled with the article’s subtitle – *American adolescents report feeling unsafe, isolated in school* - it seems that middle schools are truly places where kids are endangered, making it appear that the proposed return to K-8 and 6-12 schools is in the best interests of adolescents.

For people who only read headlines, this article would be another in a decade long list that raises credibility issues regarding middle school practice and philosophy. Actually reading the article reveals some interesting contradictions, ones that have plagued middle schools since their inception (Gruhn and Douglass, 1947). The most significant concern is that Viadero (2004) lumps all schools for young adolescents under the *middle school* label, while at the same time writing that:

Even though middle schools themselves have become ubiquitous, the practices that are supposed to go hand in hand with the philosophy have not. Many middle schools do not provide common planning times so that teachers can undertake interdisciplinary team-teaching, for example, nor do they offer advisory programs or flexible class schedules (p.8).

By definition, schools that fail to provide common planning time, lack flexible schedules, and do not offer advisory programs are most likely *junior high schools*, and therefore cannot historically, philosophically, pragmatically, and justifiably be called *real* middle schools. The distinctions between middle schools and

junior highs lie in more than the name on their stationary and must be recognized by those who write about education in order to provide any fair assessment of how young adolescents are feeling and learning in their respective schools. Failure to differentiate between junior high schools and middle schools does little to accurately portray the various ways that young adolescents are being educated in the United States (Beane, 1999). Recent comparative research between schools where middle level practice and philosophy were being consciously and consistently implemented (middle schools) and similar schools not using middle level practices (junior high schools) indicated that students in middle schools had improved test scores, had higher stress to succeed academically but felt safer than they did before middle level practices were implemented, and reported higher levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy (Anfara, et.al. 2003). Based on this research, as well as my own observations in schools for sixth, seventh and eighth grade students, it is clear that in schools where middle level practices have been well established, the majority of young adolescents show few of the characteristics indicated in the Viadero article. *Horizon Schools* are such schools.

The Illinois Horizon School Program

The Illinois Horizon Schools is a recognition program that was developed as part of a collaborative effort with the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform and the Association of Illinois Middle Schools (AIMS). The Illinois Horizon School program was created as a way to recognize exemplary middle schools at the state level; much like the National Forum recognizes Schools to Watch on a national level. These middle schools:

... seek social equity, academic excellence, and developmental responsiveness. Such schools should serve as models and mentors for other schools seeking to improve, even as they continue their

own efforts to provide exemplary educational programs for young adolescents (AIMS, 2004).

In order to receive Horizon School status, a middle school must be member of the AIMS network and submit a self-study to a Horizon Schools evaluation team made up of middle level educators who have been trained to evaluate schools in accordance with the National Forum guidelines. The self-study requires the schools to create an application team made up of administrators, staff, and parents. Each school application team uses a four-point scaled self-rating survey to determine the degree of Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Structure and Processes that they believe exists in their school. In addition to completing the self-study, each school includes demographic information, copies of their school's state report card for the past three years, and writes a narrative that corresponds to the components of the self-rating survey. If the self-study is deemed acceptable, the team of evaluators visits the applying schools. Day long site visits include teacher, student, parent, and administrative interviews (both individual and focus group), classroom observations, and extensive document reviews related to curriculum, educational policies, student work samples, newsletters, and other related papers.

Following the site visit, each member of the evaluation team writes a report that highlights the respective school's strengths and weaknesses, and recommends or denies Horizon status. The evaluation team meets once more to discuss their reports and to collectively determine whether or not the school qualifies as an Illinois Horizon School. Schools are notified shortly after this final meeting.

As a member of two evaluation teams, I found that schools that achieve Horizon status look quite different from those described in the Viadero article as advisory periods, common team planning time, exploratory programs, and flexible block scheduling are fully implemented. When I interviewed students at two of these

schools (Gregory in Naperville, IL and Kennedy in Lisle, IL) they gave me the impression of being empowered not only in their classrooms, but in the community itself through service learning experiences. This empowerment included the opportunity to select classes and extracurricular activities, and also the ability to have a say in the type of work that they do. What was especially encouraging was that the students indicated that they were learning about citizenship and democracy through active participation, not by reading about it or hearing their teachers telling them about it. They impressed me as students who were actively forming their identities and learning simultaneously – a true sign of a developmentally responsive middle school.

As important as this type of learning may be, the current fact is that we live in an age of test score accountability, where students are reduced to a set of numbers. The test scores at Kennedy and Gregory exceeded the state average by 25%, providing additional support for studies that link the implementation of middle level practices with solid test scores (Felner, et. al 1997; Mertens & Flowers, 2003).

Two exemplary schools do not end the siege, but it is important to look at these and other *real* middle schools as places where young adolescents are successful and safe, and feel that they are empowered. Other schools do exist and Georgia, California, Colorado, Kentucky, New York, Ohio, Virginia, and North Carolina are states that have established recognition programs similar to that are similar to the Horizon Schools initiative. Such schools do not deserve to be lumped together with ineffective schools for young adolescents. It is necessary to point out such distinctions as these are the schools that can lead the way and provide inspiration for those who want to help young adolescents fully achieve.

References

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