

Here Comes the New K–8 School

A new school organization is quietly emerging in the city systems, suburban communities, and rural districts of the United States. In most cases, the formation of the new K–8 school results from combining elementary and middle school programs. Approximately 5,000 of this nation’s 45,000 elementary and middle schools have already converted to this new curriculum design, and dozens of additional schools are joining the movement each month. This new K–8 program promises to change the way America educates its children.

The attraction of the K–8 school model comes from many things: a promise of better testing achievement, greater parental choice, a perceived cost effectiveness, smaller and more personal learning environments, lowered secondary school dropout rates, and the ability to retain community support for our schools. It is largely a commonsense movement. This new emerging curriculum can be relatively seamless from kindergarten through the eighth grade and can be defined by state learning standards and 21st century thinking skills. The new K–8 movement is altering the curriculum in elementary and middle schools across America and will soon change the way teachers operate in the classroom of those schools.

ORIGINS OF THE NEW K–8 SCHOOL

To fully understand the meaning of this new and emerging educational design, it is useful to review what we know about traditional elementary and middle school programs in America. These programs share a historic commitment to child-centeredness and to the concept of general education in Grades K–8. Both today’s K–5 elementary programs and the 6–8 middle

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school programs have a long history of successfully educating children and young adolescents in America. Yet there seems to be something wrong with the way in which these two traditional programs are functioning at the present and it is this dissatisfaction with the status quo that is driving the K–8 movement in the United States, community by community.

The modern K–5 elementary school has evolved during the past 200 years from a narrow curriculum devoted to teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic to a much broader program that encompasses not only learning skills but also a variety of learning experiences. Less than 25 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock (1620), the colonies were establishing schools, and these first elementary schools taught a kind of civic literacy curriculum. The basic assumption about educating children in those times was that they were like miniature adults and susceptible to evil forces (the Devil). Schools were seen as places where these “empty vessels” would be filled with useful knowledge and where, sometimes, it might be necessary to “beat the devil” out of children.

A new model of education for children began to form in the late 19th century based on humanistic (person-centered) ideas. Charles Darwin significantly influenced this new model with his theory of evolution; if plants and animals adapt to their environment, so also might children. Children were not empty containers to be filled, but rather dynamic organisms with many growth possibilities.

Three European educators also influenced the early elementary schools of America with their ideas. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau contributed the notion that children were good, not bad; “noble savages” he called them. Johann Pestalozzi, a Swiss educator, encouraged schools to be holistic in their approach, teaching to the head, the heart, and the hand. The German Frederick Froebel, father of the kindergarten, wrote that children’s learning should be built around the interests and experience of students. He saw learning as social interaction, experimentation, and trial interactions with the environment.

America’s most famous educator, John Dewey, contributed to the philosophy and methodology of the elementary school in his work between 1884 and 1905. Dewey proposed a natural school, centered on the development of children, where a climate of positivism would prevail. Dewey held that subject matter was for living and should be integrated into everyday life experiences. Education was to be a dynamic process, with the student—rather than the teacher—being the primary player.

This new way of thinking about the elementary school became known as the *progressive* approach, as opposed to the traditional approach. Progressive education differed in many ways from the old way of educating (see Figure 1.1), especially in the way the teacher and students interacted. Because students in elementary schools were not simply small adults, and

Figure 1.1 Contrasting models for education 1900

<i>Traditional Model</i>	<i>Progressive Model</i>
Human nature is imperfect and must be “made.” Children are incomplete adults.	Humans are good and their ultimate form results from interaction with their environment.
Students are to be controlled and corrected by the teachers.	Students grow naturally and only need guidance by teachers.
Common and structured learning is desirable.	Learning is always an individual experience.
A fixed and standardized curriculum is appropriate for children.	Curriculum should be individualized and developmentally appropriate.
Teachers have the knowledge and share it with students.	Teachers are also learners and should provide guidance to young learners.
Schools should be knowledge-based.	Schools should be based on learning experiences.

because they were all unique in their development, the organization and outcomes of learning had to be more flexible. These ideas about educating were strongly reinforced by early psychology in the United States and studies of human development (i.e., early childhood education, gifted education, exceptional education, and middle school education) throughout the 20th century.

The structure of the American elementary school in the late 19th century and early 20th century included Grades 1–8 in most states. The introduction of the Grades 7–9 junior high school in 1909 led many districts to restructure their elementary schools in a Grades 1–6 pattern. Junior high schools multiplied rapidly until the 1940s and then began to decline. Many junior highs soon became small models of the senior high school.

A major problem for the junior high school in the United States was the inclusion of the ninth grade. Because students in attendance had to earn high school credits in that grade, much instructional flexibility was lost. Also, the fully adolescent ninth grader in the junior high school did not seem to belong with the students experiencing the onset of puberty.

In the mid-1960s, the junior high school program, always modeled after the high school, began to be replaced by a hybrid institution called the *middle school*. The middle school originated as a restructured junior high and then took its modern shape in the 1960s to become America’s most original curriculum design. At first, it was difficult to determine the difference between a junior high school and a middle school, but as the middle school became established, the differences became more pronounced (see Figure 1.2).

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Figure 1.2 Contrasting junior highs and middle schools

<i>Junior High School</i>	<i>Middle School</i>
Housing Grades 7–9	Housing Grades 6–8
Based on high school model	More like extended elementary school
Content-based curriculum	Balanced curriculum features content, skills, and personal development
Fixed curriculum, few electives	Exploratory, rich, and flexible curriculum
Highly structured organization	Very flexible organization
Teachers as subject specialist	Teachers in interdisciplinary teams

Acknowledging the developmental difference between a child, a “preadolescent,” and a full adolescent, the new middle school staked out the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades as the appropriate grade combinations for this middle group (The Berkeley Growth Studies and Harvard Growth Studies, 1962). This recombining of grades effectively left the existing elementary schools as a combination of Grades 1–5 or, after 1970, K–5.

Middle schools quickly developed a clear philosophy and mission. These schools were to be a special program of education for 10–14-year-old students who were experiencing a unique period of growth and development. These students would go through puberty and make the transition from older childhood to young adulthood under the middle school tutelage. The students would be characterized by their vast differences, and the school would have to be extremely flexible in its organization to accommodate this wide range of learners. A host of organizational structures became common to middle schools including block schedules, team teaching, interdisciplinary instruction, advisory guidance programs, exploratory wheels, and intramural programs.

Middle schools in the United States experienced phenomenal growth between 1970 and 1990, becoming the organizational format (Grades 6–8) for two-thirds of all intermediate students. The promise of being able to meet the needs of all pupils in attendance was seductive, and many middle schools did serve their students exceedingly well during this time period; others, did not.

By the early 1980s, middle school programs across America began to experience a series of fatal problems. Funding, following the Vietnam War, was a major difficulty for the complex and sophisticated middle school programs that needed substantial resources to operate. The legislative response to these financial difficulties, focusing and narrowing the curriculum by the use of performance standards, was the antithesis of middle school philosophy. Second, there was no effective evaluation to prove that middle

schools worked better than junior high schools (Wiles, 1975). Finally, middle schools failed to define the content portion (subject matter) of the curriculum resulting in a tug-of-war by competing pressure groups about the purpose of intermediate education. By the early 1990s, warning signs were appearing that many middle schools were not working so well. This was particularly true in large urban middle schools and small rural middle schools.

From the mid-1990s until the present, there has been a growing voice from national commissions, educators, and parents calling for reform and another kind of lower school in America. The public is asking for a school relevant to the needs of the 21st century. Educators desire a more cost-effective and efficient school, one that can demonstrate academic results. Parents seem to want a more personal program, closer to home, where their children will be safe and known, and where it is certain that meaningful learning is taking place. This drive for restructuring elementary and intermediate programs by all these groups, growing daily, is the force behind the new American K–8 school emerging as the 21st century model program.

RATIONALE FOR CHANGING THE SCHOOL DESIGN

A substantial debate about what needs to be done with our schools has been going on for a decade in the literature of intermediate education in the United States. Involved in these discussions have been traditional elementary school educators, middle school educators, and some advocates for a new “elemiddle” or K–8 school. These groups have more in common than they have differences, and their philosophies of education are remarkably similar. The hundreds of articles written over the past 10 years about educating students in kindergarten through eighth grade have been more about *how* than *what*.

School districts in rural, suburban, and urban areas have entered into these on-going discussions, speaking loudly by their actions in establishing K–8 schools. At the time of this writing, more than 20 of the largest urban districts in America have committed to restructuring, employing the new K–8 configuration (see Figure 1.3). These local decisions to abandon middle schools or to add-on three grades to traditional elementary schools have not always been made for educational reasons. Nonetheless, the fact that so many K–8 schools are presently being created in urban systems and rural districts, and now many suburban districts, has significantly influenced the on-going professional discussion. Almost without rationale, planning, or funding, a major change is beginning to unfold in how Americans will educate their children.

The reasons given by school districts for restructuring into a K–8 pattern are many and varied. Some are restructuring because of failed middle school programs. Some districts, undoubtedly, are shifting student

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Figure 1.3 Twenty-one large urban school districts restructured using the K–8 model

Baltimore	Memphis	Pittsburgh
Boston	Milwaukee	Rochester
Chicago	New Orleans	Salt Lake City
Cincinnati	New York	San Diego
Cleveland	Newark	San Francisco
Dayton	Oklahoma City	Trenton
Louisville	Philadelphia	Washington, DC

populations around to meet facility needs. Some districts are reacting to the costly dropout pattern in the early years of the high school. And, in some large urban districts, internal research is driving the K–8 transformation.

In those studies that compare student performances in K–8 schools with student performance in 6–8 middle schools, the K–8 students are found to do better on standardized achievement tests in all existing studies. Self-studies in districts also find that K–8 students attend school more often, have fewer discipline referrals, are suspended less frequently, and have better overall attitudes toward school. Many of these studies are not “causal,” and most are lacking accepted research designs. These studies are summarized for the reader in Resource A at the end of this book.

The literature on the new K–8 school provides a long list of advantages for changing models. Twenty of the more common arguments are presented in Figure 1.4.

Looking at the many reasons for supporting K–8 education models, the reader will note major categories of thought. For example, parents favor a smaller neighborhood school where their children can attend uninterrupted for 9 years. Busing and an unnecessary transition to a middle school would be avoided. Siblings could attend the same school, thereby lessening the transportation burden for parents.

In such a school, teachers would know the students and the school would presume to be safer. Special needs of children would be known better by teachers. Discipline and suspensions would be less frequent. Students would be more mature and secure and would drop out of high school less often.

Administrators and teachers would favor a seamless K–8 curriculum that would result in better teaching and better student achievement. Students would not have to deal with a transition in the sixth grade and would have better attitudes at school. Older students could have leadership experiences in working with younger students at the school site.

Teachers, too, would be more secure and would turn over less often.

Figure 1.4 Twenty arguments for K–8 schools

1. Better academic achievement
2. Better student attitudes toward school
3. Safety in neighborhood schools
4. Fewer disciplinary problems
5. One less school transition for students
6. Teachers know kids for 9 years
7. Ease of transportation for parents with siblings in same school
8. Lower dropout rate in high school
9. Personal small-school identity
10. Technology allows in-depth academics and specialization
11. More attention to at-risk students
12. Lessens district busing requirements
13. Parents more comfortable with schools
14. Can run a middle school program inside the K–8 building
15. Continuous progress is more probable
16. Seamless curriculum with better articulation between the grades
17. Teachers more qualified for child-centered approach
18. Possible for students to experience more leadership roles
19. Less teacher turnover
20. Discipline and suspensions lowered

Persistent arguments about the need for more or less academic specialization in the upper grades could be met by remodeling schools—(cheaper than building) to provide special study areas, using new learning technologies to access in-depth knowledge, placing academic magnet schools within elementary schools, and even by running a traditional middle school program right inside the K–8 building.

These seemingly sound and convincing arguments favoring the K–8 school, however, have been challenged repeatedly in the literature, and in the field, by specific reservations about the curriculum found in K–8 schools (see Figure 1.5). There are genuine concerns, for example, about the academic nature of the upper grades in a K–8 school.

There can be little doubt that a substantial and genuine curriculum argument might be made against converting to K–8 schools. Preparation for high school requires in-depth work in academic disciplines, and most elementary teachers do not have much subject matter depth in their training. Due to the small size of most neighborhood K–8 schools (400–450 pupils), these schools may not have enough teachers to offer live, upper-level courses (algebra) or specialized courses (languages). In addition,

Figure 1.5 Reservations concerning K–8 schools

1. Fewer advanced academic courses (such as algebra) are available.
2. Major problems with redistricting for attendance may occur.
3. Science labs, music rooms, and special facilities are absent.
4. The possibility of student bullying increases.
5. Sexual maturation of older students creates social problems.
6. Sports programs and traditions decline.
7. Major certification problems exist for teachers in many states.
8. Libraries are superior and more grade-appropriate in middle schools.
9. “Dumbing down” the academic curriculum is a distinct possibility.

laboratories will not be available for lab sciences, the fine arts, and advanced music. Sports programs will necessarily be diluted. Libraries will, in most cases, be inadequate for in-depth study.

Planners of new K–8 schools will need to consider these reservations carefully. It is obvious to the author that there must be a focus on the curriculum in planning any new K–8 school and how such a school should be organized. This shift in the intermediate curricular program defines the purpose of this book.

BEDROCK BELIEFS ABOUT EDUCATING CHILDREN

As noted earlier, the various programs that serve students from kindergarten to eighth grade in the United States share the same core values and assumptions about human development and learning (see Figure 1.6). For over a century, elementary schools, junior high schools, and middle schools have seen child development (not subjects) as the organizer for the curriculum. The development of young children, older children, preadolescents, and adolescents, has been studied extensively, and there is wide acceptance of the idea that children develop in an orderly manner but at different rates. There are models of growth that are widely referenced by both elementary and middle school educators (Elkind, 1993; Gardner, 1983; Gessell, 1946; Havighurst, 1962; Piaget, 1969). Using these models, the educators have fashioned “developmentally appropriate” curriculums for learning.

Elementary and middle school educators see the child as a dynamic organism capable of considerable learning. These educators also share the belief that children learn by interacting with their environment. The lower school educators believe that previous experiences (prior learning) in life determines the readiness of the child to succeed in school. Student motivation to learn, they feel, is present when the school task and student interests overlap. Elementary and middle grades teachers generally agree that students should be the primary focus of any K–8 school program.

Figure 1.6 Bedrock beliefs of elementary and middle grades education

- The child is the focus of the curriculum.
- Human development is predictable and orderly.
- Knowledge, skills, and experiences are foundational.
- The program is broad, balanced, and “whole child.”
- Learning should be developmentally appropriate.
- Subject matter should be integrated and applied to the real world.
- Students learn best in a positive climate.
- Prior experience determines readiness to learn.
- Relevance for the student activates motivation to learn.
- Families and community are partners in school learning.
- All students can learn.
- All students should experience success in school.

Planners for K–8 education must consider carefully any district or community preK programs that will establish the foundation for the new schools. PreK programs in the United States differ greatly in the degree to which they are social or academic in design. Certainly, a preK school undergirding the new K–8 program must provide students with experiences that will increase their awareness and understanding of what is to follow. Working backwards, K–8 school leaders should actively suggest appropriate learning tools and experiences to those operating the district preK programs. Such articulation is rarely found in public, private, and parochial schools.

The environment for learning in a K–8 school is believed to be very important at this level of education, and both the elementary and the middle school educator would promote a positive and supportive learning climate at all times. The family and the community, at this level of schooling, are perceived as important partners in the learning process. Where possible, these educators agree, learning should be integrated and applied to the real world of the student.

Finally, both elementary and middle grades educators would promote a broad, general, foundational program of learning. They feel there should be room for differences, expansion, and success in learning for all students. The “whole child” curriculum of the K–8 grades should be both expansive and exploratory.

The appropriateness of the K–8 curriculum model, versus the K–6 model, or the K–5, 6–8 combination, is not a question of *what* to teach but of *how* to teach. The relevance or appropriateness of the curriculum configuration will depend on local needs and conditions, but the task for any lower school remains constant: to serve students in their growth and development through childhood and beyond. This distinction is all-important for K–8 planners.

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The learning theorists who define the instructional approach for elementary and middle grades schools are the same:

Learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based on their current/past knowledge. The curriculum should be organized in a spiral manner so that the student continually builds upon what they have already learned.

—Jerome Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*

Cognitive structures correspond to four stages of child development: sensorimotor (ages 0–2), preoperational–intuitive (ages 3–7), concrete operations–logical (ages 8–11), and formal operations–abstraction (ages 12–15). Any learning activities should involve the appropriate level of motor or mental operation for a child; avoid asking students to perform tasks that are beyond their current cognitive abilities.

—Jean Piaget, *The Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*

Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Full intellectual development requires social interaction.

—L. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*

Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is relevant to the personal interests of the student; the student is the originator of learning.

—C. R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*

AN INITIAL LOOK AT THE NEW K–8 PROGRAM WE NEED

In districts that are restructuring education by creating K–8 schools, the question of what such a school might look like is an important one. Simply to combine grades or consolidate grades into a single school may invalidate nearly a century of knowledge about children and how they learn. Educators are aware, and accept the premise, that there are distinct growth periods within the 5–13-year-old age range. Even if all of these students are housed in only one facility, they cannot be offered a single unitary program. The curriculum of the K–8 school will necessarily be unique. Your author, who has worked with both elementary and intermediate schools for more than three decades, envisions some general organizers for any new K–8 program:

The school curriculum will

- be organized by distinct phases of development including, early childhood, late childhood, preadolescence, and adolescence,

- be concerned with general education and not simply academic specialization,
- be sequential in all subjects from orientation, to mastery, to expansion, and finally to application,
- define content in terms of required state learning standards, and
- use learning skills to create a seamless general education (K–8) experience for all students.

For more than one hundred years, American educators have studied the growth and development of young people. During the K–8 years in school, students will evolve from young children (ages 5–6) to older children (ages 7–10), to preadolescence (ages 11–12), and finally into adolescence (13+). The physical, social, intellectual, and emotional state of each student is different at each stage of development, and acknowledging these stages of growth will make any K–8 curriculum more relevant and effective.

By capping this new school at the eighth grade, designers will have the advantage of not being burdened by existing high school credit requirements (Carnegie units for graduation). In fact, in most states, there is little regulation of the curriculum prior to the ninth grade. As a result of this freedom, the K–8 school can develop a program that is organized in a logical way, one that benefits all students in attendance, and one that leads to a more functional level of citizenship regardless of the academic destination of the student. A “general education” for all students has always been one of the strengths of the public education system of the United States.

The curriculum of the K–8 school will be organized to meet the developmental needs of the student and will have four stages regardless of grade level or subject:

1. Orientation
2. Foundational learning
3. Expansion and exploration
4. Application

This simple progression follows all that is known about teaching and learning at this level of schooling.

Subject learning standards, developed by all states over the past decade, will help order this K–8 curriculum so that it will be a defined experience. All students should experience nine years of planned curriculum during Grades K–8, even if they do not completely master the entire curriculum. Any new K–8 school will have to accommodate the increasing range of student performance: As students progress through school, they spread out in level of attainment, achievement, and maturity, so that in any given class there will be a year of range in these levels for each year the students have

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Figure 1.7 The learning progression in K–8 schools

Orientation → Foundational Learning → Exploration → Application

attended school (e.g., 1 year of range in reading in first grade, 4 years of range in reading in fourth grade). The K–8 school will need to plan for this range of learning in its performance standards, learning materials, classroom instruction, and student assessment.

Finally, what will make this new K–8 school seamless from kindergarten to eighth grade will be the way in which learning skills and thinking skills are used to treat subject content material. Each student, regardless of their achievement level in a given subject area, will learn to assess the knowledge and apply it in post-school life.

The curriculum models used by emerging K–8 schools are varied and represent the needs and priorities of the communities that support them.

- A Florida school in the Orlando area is using an integrated approach to make the curriculum meaningful to students. Citizenship skills and values are woven into all lessons.
- A K–8 on the Westside of Los Angeles promotes student security by emphasizing family groups and having all students participate in community service projects. First graders are paired with third graders for skill learning, and fifth graders and students from the kindergarten are paired for lessons in art, poetry, and celebrations.
- A school in suburban Maryland has adopted the K–8 model to halt a decline in academic performance. Special programs in language, the performing arts, Montessori, and academic magnets will be superimposed on regular school programs.
- A rural K–8 school in Oregon is beefing up its technology to help its students gain access to more advanced academic offerings.

SOME ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH K–8 EDUCATION

The original K–8 program of the 19th and early 20th centuries was a terminal program of general education and citizenship. During the 20th century, the number of American students attending high school and beyond has grown dramatically. An initial issue for any K–8 school will be to deliver some sort of academic program that adequately prepares students for high school. For reasons listed throughout this chapter, many K–8 schools are not currently prepared to accomplish this task.

A second issue for the K–8 model will be to also deliver a curriculum that benefits older children and preadolescents. Creating K–8 schools by adding

on grades means that the facility, faculty preparation, and instructional procedures will be primarily for an “elementary” program. Although much of the current literature on K–8 schools suggests that eleven-, twelve-, and thirteen-year-olds can be housed in an existing elementary school without much difficulty, the author finds the notion troubling. Preadolescent and adolescent students are full of energy, emotions, and social behaviors that will not easily be accommodated in the typical self-contained elementary classroom. The distinctive feature of this age group (11–13) is their puberty and all of its active manifestations. Somehow, a program for “growing up” will have to be developed and delivered within the K–8 structure.

Third, the role of subject content in the new K–8 school must be addressed and clarified. Some see this level as continued general education and other see this level as a preparation for secondary studies. Both the junior high school and the middle school attempted to ignore the strong philosophic differences about the purpose of education at this level and paid dearly for that omission. Clearly, this new K–8 school must stand on its own and do what is best for all of its students.

Finally, an issue for many new K–8 programs will be to keep focused on why this school is emerging, largely unplanned, in the United States at this time. Critics tell us that middle schools are doing a poor job with student achievement, discipline, and attitudes toward learning. Parents are pushing school boards to create a school where their child is safe and known by teachers, and where every student can experience success. Both the existing junior high school and the middle school have seemingly lost sight of these “forces for restructuring” and are disappearing rapidly. The new K–8 school must learn from the mistakes of these other programs and keep their decision-making criteria highly focused at all times.

The nuts and bolts of developing a K–8 program in the 21st century will take care of themselves. What is most important for the reader to gain from this chapter is that this is an opportunity for teachers, principals, superintendents, board members, and parents to get it right this time, once and for all.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY GROUPS

1. What can the new K–8 school do for students that the other pattern (6–8) did not provide?
2. Why does the author think it is important that the K–8 school follow a progressive model?
3. What must the K–8 school do to meet academic expectations for older students?
4. How can student development be used to organize the curriculum?
5. What must be done to meet the needs and concerns of K–8 parents?

SUMMARY

The K–8 school, the new American K–8 school, has rushed upon the scene in schools and districts throughout America without policy or funding, and sometimes without even planning. This new model is testimony to the displeasure of parents and educators with the current pattern of elementary and middle schools.

The promise of the new school, based on experience in many large districts, suburban districts, and numerous smaller rural districts, is that this may be a superior organization for American education. Many measures of a successful school, from academic performance, to behavior, to the reception of parents, seem to be confirmed by early assessments.

Despite such affirmation, there are concerns and issues in developing the K–8 model regardless of whether this is a conversion or a brand new educational design. Those key issues include the academic program of the school, the need to service at least three developmental stages in one building, the accommodation of sometimes-difficult preadolescent learners, and staying focused on what parents and communities want from this new school.

The new K–8 school represents an opportunity to get it right this time. As such, the development of a curriculum program for this school may serve as a source of renewal for all involved in the process.

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