Developing **Successful** K–8 Schools

A Principal's Guide

Jon Wiles

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1 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 school programs

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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 stu-

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Figure 1.1 Contrasting models for education 1900

Traditional Model	*Progressive Model*
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.

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dents in elementary schools were not simply small adults, and 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

Figure 1.2 Contrasting junior highs and middle schools

Junior High School	*Middle School*
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

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differences became more pronounced (see Figure 1.2).

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

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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

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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

school programs. Some districts, undoubtedly, are shifting student 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.

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