



HAWAI'I EDUCATIONAL POLICY CENTER

Middle Level Grade Configuration: Impact on Hawai'i's Schools

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the years, a variety of changing influences have impacted the configuration of schools for middle-level students. Since 1915, the most basic system has consisted of elementary schools with grades kindergarten to 8 (K-8) and secondary schools with grades 9 through 12. In the early 20th century, the junior-high school came into being to meet the needs of young adolescents. The 10-14 junior-high age group was given a subject based curriculum. In 1963, in response to concerns that the junior-high had too closely emulated the senior high school, and that a more child-centered focus was needed, the movement toward middle-schools began.

In 1973, the National Middle School Association was founded by a group implicitly critical of the junior-high school, and throughout the 1980s and the 1990s the middle-school concept gained increasing prominence and popularity in educational circles. In 1989, Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents released what became the landmark report *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*. The report fueled organizational and curricular change in middle-schools across the nation.

In 2000, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* appeared, revising the 1989 recommendations. This report urged grounding the middle-level curriculum in standards, and employing instructional methods enabling all students to reach high standards. Some have since been concerned that this has taken the middle-school movement too far in the direction of standards and away from its original path. In the 1960s and '70s, the implementation of middle-school models had led to new curricular trends marked by greater student-centeredness and stronger focus on the developmental traits of young adolescents. There was also more integration and connection to the school and daily life experiences of middle-level youngsters. The introductions of standards-based curricula and high-stakes testing in the 1980's and '90's, however, tended to impede these efforts.

Tracking, or the grouping of children by ability and achievement levels, has also impacted the middle-school. Researchers in Hawaii found that social positions are associated with the course-taking patterns of students, and that tracks, i.e. formal structures, differentiate students. They found that over-representation in the lowest tracks leads to a greater likelihood of noncompletion of high school at the end of four years. Through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the federal government extended assistance to the schools of economically disadvantaged students -- those often assigned to lower tracks. But the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, which ostensibly continued ESEA, threatened these schools with punitive consequences.

Since middle-school students represent more than half the students tested nationally under *No Child Left Behind's* aegis, reauthorization proposals call for reallocating funding so that these schools receive more. Current scores appear to be very low among this age group. To increase achievement at this age level, the National Middle School Association in 2003 listed six programmatic components for a successful middle-school. Although relevant longitudinal research is rare, several such studies have shown that implementation of the middle-school framework has a positive effect on student achievement. Recommended reforms include *Success for All Middle Schools*,

which was a response to the Carnegie Corporation's 1989 Report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*. A review of one hundred studies on the achievement outcomes of mathematics programs for middle- and high school concluded that when cooperative learning programs were introduced, gains in learning increased.

There is no 'one' grade configuration for middle-level. Hawaii currently has seven of them serving middle-level students: K-8, K-9, K-10, K-12, 6-8, 7-8, and 7-12, with 6-8 being the most frequently used, followed by 7,8. The evidence is inconclusive on whether students achieve better in K-8 elementary schools or in middle-schools that are attached to elementary schools than in separate middle schools. This points to the need for studies in the area of configuration.

An area that has been extensively studied and well documented concerns meeting the social and psychological developmental needs of students aged 10-14 years (Hough, 1995). Much attention has been focused on the issue of school safety following the events of Columbine and other school violence tragedies. Bullying, in all of its various forms, is of particular concern - to students as well as to school personnel. And a recent national study indicates that bullying occurs as frequently among girls as boys. Particular classes of students, including those who are thought to be gay, lesbian or bisexual are among the most vulnerable to becoming victims of bullying. Hawai'i has experienced an increase in bullying and other forms of physical and verbal violence among middle-level students, including girls. The data established that for one in five youths in Hawai'i, gang involvement is a significant part of their lives. These populations include girls as well as boys, with a large number of middle-level students involved.

There is overwhelming evidence that violence is much less likely to occur in small schools than in large ones. Students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging in small schools and dropping out occurs less frequently. Charter schools, often smaller in size than regular public schools, have fewer discipline incidents.

An analysis of data on school size and disciplinary infractions in Hawai'i charter and regular public schools was conducted for this study. There were stark differences in numbers and degree of disciplinary infractions by middle-level students in Hawai'i charter and regular public schools - both in numbers of incidents and types, and in the severity of the infractions. Regular Department of Education public schools serving middle-level students had more than twice the rate of offenses per student as charter schools serving middle-level students. The disciplinary infractions by regular public school students were of a more serious nature and involved a much higher percentage of schools.

Nationally, dropping out is a significant problem at the middle-level. This is so in Hawai'i as well, with many disengaged Native Hawaiian youngsters leaving school without completing it. Research indicates that school-to-school transitions -- e.g. elementary to middle-school and middle-school to high school at 9th grade -- are critical times for adolescents.

Statement of Findings

This report highlights the need for support for the unique set of needs of middle-level students. Middle-grades do much more than serve a set of students from ages 10-15 during their transition from elementary to high school. This is a period when crucial social and physical development occurs. Thus, a middle-level foundation that takes

students successfully to a secondary education, and later to a post-secondary education with a successful career as productive citizens, needs to be reinforced, regardless of school configuration.

The research indicates that school configuration *is not what matters*. What impacts school achievement most -- and school safety as well -- is school size. How do we build stronger communities for learning in schools? We in Hawai'i live amidst a culture that values *ohana* over all, yet our schools represent huge factories. Thus, it is irrelevant to struggle over grade configuration when what is critical is community. When economic pressures occur within school districts, issues of efficiency may clash with issues involving quality and equity: building usage may need to be rethought to accommodate smaller learning communities, with specific criteria clearly in the interests of child wellbeing.

Policy Implications for Hawai'i

1. Impact of Federal Legislation. Substantial pressures impinge upon middle-level teachers who wish to practice developmentally sound practices and who, at the same time, are subject to macro-level standards-based policies such as those of *No Child Left Behind*. Researchers report that under NCLB parameters (NCLB, 2001), states may define the upper grades within their K-8 schools as elementary schools or as secondary schools. If the state classifies the middle-school grades within the K-8 school as an elementary school, then these grades must meet the NCLB standards for elementary school teacher quality. However, if the state defines the upper grades in the K-8 facility as a separate 'school-within-a-school' then the NCLB holds the grades to secondary school standards for teacher quality. NCLB requires new teachers in middle-schools who are not within a K-8 facility to have a major or the equivalent of a major in each subject they teach. Given that the majority of middle-level programs in Hawai'i are not part of K-8 facilities, most of the middle-school teachers will have to meet the more stringent requirements. This presents a challenge as the state tries to recruit and retain middle-school teachers, particularly for high-poverty and/or rural areas.

2. Teacher Preparation and Licensing. Training for middle-school teachers presents an additional challenge. In addition to academic content, middle-school teachers must also have knowledge of the unique developmental issues that their students present (NMSA, 2003). There is a need to provide a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Middle-Level Education (CMLE) to ensure middle-level teachers in the state of Hawai'i will have an opportunity to receive the quality and level of educational support they need to instruct middle-level students. There is also a need to establish middle-level licensure at the state level, to ensure that middle-school teachers are properly prepared, and that they have an education that includes knowledge of the unique developmental issues of the middle-level students. Veteran middle-level teachers need professional development resources enabling them to become highly qualified in every subject they teach.

3. Reduce Truancy and Dropouts. Hawai'i dropout rates are among the highest in the nation, and the implications for middle-school students are enormous. The impact is not only costly to the individuals involved, but also to the state. Each high school dropout

earns approximately \$9,600 less annually in salary, than a high school graduate¹. He or she would also be likely to be the first to be laid off when times were financially difficult for employers. The dropout will likely contribute far less in taxes and be far more costly in terms of the need for public services². Experience has indicated which processes are most likely to yield successful school attainment and achievement. These include creating truancy reduction programs at the school level to help reduce dropout rates.

4. Create and Implement Anti-Bullying Programs. Discipline infractions involving harassment and other forms of bullying occur frequently in Hawai'i's public schools. Anti-bullying programs and uniform reporting policies need to be established, with a designated funding stream so as not to divert from classroom resources.

Recommendations

1. The Hawai'i Department of Education should continue to support improving the education of the middle-level population. There are currently openings for middle-level teachers, and teacher shortages presently require unlicensed or out-of-field placements. Requiring full licensure in a middle-level education program will ensure teachers have the knowledge to teach students.

2. Create a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Middle-Level Education (CMLE) in the College of Education. Such a certificate provides middle-level educators with the knowledge they need to teach students with their unique developmental issues. Such a program should have the depth and the breadth necessary to teach at the middle-level. Teachers should thus be able to have breadth by having a wide range of subjects e.g. *multiple subject knowledge* and have in-depth knowledge shown by passing the PRAXIS.

3. Provide middle-level teachers with common planning time to improve student outcomes, including achievement, safety, growth and development.

4. Student safety is a primary concern as middle-grade students confront the emotional and social challenges of early adolescence. Thus, the following recommendations are made with regard to school safety:

(a) Develop and implement a state-wide discipline code that is proactively enforced and augmented by school-level strategies that hold students accountable for disruptive and inappropriate behavior. School-level policies should create a culture of high expectations for student behavior, as well as establish clear, firm boundaries and discipline for those who break rules. Faculty, staff, parents and students all need to be assured that safety is a high priority in Hawai'i public schools.

(b) The literature shows a serious gap in how teachers respond to bullying. Bullying comes in both physical and verbal forms and teachers' responses vary from taking proactive measures, to just breaking up physical incidents, to being unaware of incidents of harassment/bullying, to completely ignoring issues. We concur with Garbarino and DeLara (2006), who recommend in-service training for school personnel on verbal abuse and on the consequences of bullying, harassment, and emotional violence. This training should include prevention techniques and ways to foster appropriate communication to promote safety. We concur with the recommendations of

¹ The average annual income for a high school dropout in 2005 was \$17,299 compared to \$26,933 for a high school graduate, a difference of \$9,634 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006).

² Each dropout, over his or her lifetime, costs the state of Hawai'i approximately \$283,000 (Rouse, 2005).

the Safe Schools Community Advisory Committee report (2007) that recommended education programs for students and parents.

5. Implement programs that address over-crowding. Fund the repair and maintenance of deteriorating middle schools. Many of the local middle-schools that serve the most under-achieving, at-risk population are overcrowded and in poor physical condition. This combination breeds an unsafe atmosphere and should be a high priority on the state's list for change.