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Study raises doubts on K-8

JHU research finds no academic benefit over middle schools, undercuts city's push

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Johns Hopkins University researchers have concluded that expanding elementary schools to sixth, seventh and eighth grades does not help adolescents do better academically - a finding that raises questions about changes in Baltimore and other urban districts.

In a multiyear study of Philadelphia's newest schools for kindergarten through eighth grade, the researchers found no significant difference in achievement between those students and their peers in traditional middle schools of sixth through eighth grades.

Worried about an achievement slump in the middle grades, Baltimore and several other urban systems are returning to the concept of putting adolescents in schools with elementary students.

"District after district is getting misled by thinking our K-8 schools are doing better than our middle schools," said Douglas Mac Iver, a Hopkins education researcher who has studied middle schools for more than a decade.

Shutting down a middle school in a neighborhood with gang violence and open-air drug markets to open a new school will not insulate the students from those influences, he said: "The grade span itself is not some magic bullet."

Baltimore has shifted students from traditional middle schools into K-8 schools, opening 18 of the new schools last fall and shutting one middle school.

The school board plans to expand up to 12 more elementaries to K-8 schools in coming years.

Philadelphia and Baltimore made the move based on test data that showed their existing K-8 students scored better on tests. The Baltimore schools' chief academic officer, Linda Chinnia, said test data from the city's schools was dramatic.

For instance, 54 percent of sixth-graders in the established K-8 schools passed the state reading test, compared with 36 percent in the traditional middle schools. Attendance was better and behavior problems fewer in the K-8 schools, she said.

But Mac Iver and his wife, Martha Mac Iver, said the data on the established K-8 schools could be skewed. At least in Philadelphia, he said, those older schools are in slightly more affluent areas of the city, and they tend to be able to attract and retain better teachers.

Hard to teach

For several decades, educators have debated where to put 11- to 14-year-olds, the most difficult-to-teach age because of the rapid physical and emotional development that occurs during those years.

Historically, when most children left school after eighth grade, schools were organized in one building. Then, in the middle of the 20th century, educators decided to keep sixth-graders in elementary schools and move seventh-, eighth- and ninth-graders into junior high schools.

Change came again in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when school districts began building middle schools for sixth through eighth grades, which today is the most common configuration, according to Alan Summers, director of professional development at the National Middle School Association.

"Currently, there is no research that says what should be the most effective grade configuration," Summers said.

The Mac Ivers' research did not look just at test scores from one grade at a middle school compared with the same grade at a K-8 school, as most school systems do.

The research went deeper, investigating how good a job middle schools did in educating the students over three years. The researchers looked at the growth students achieved in their three middle school years.

The research could help guide administrators deciding how to reform middle schools in their districts.

What it shows, Mac Iver said, is that the quality of the teaching, the curriculum and other factors matter just as much.

Because Baltimore's major push toward having many more K-8 schools is new, there is no statistical information on how the new schools are working.

But the city also is trying to improve the rigor of academics, standardizing the curriculum in all the middle grades and looking at requiring all eighth-graders to take algebra.

Chinnia said the district does not intend to use one model for all middle schools but rather to offer parents and students a variety of options for middle school.

Some parents feel more comfortable having their students in their neighborhood elementary school, she said, while others would prefer to have their children in a large middle school with more course offerings.

Math programs

Mac Iver said his research indicates that students who were taught using several different reform math programs scored higher than their peers who did not use those programs.

"Our research has consistently shown the positive effects of National Science Foundation-supported reform mathematics programs on student achievement," he said, adding that it must include coaching for teachers and other kinds of teacher training.

As inner-city middle schools have grown tougher, parents have often lobbied to have their children stay in the neighborhood, where they believe children will be safer.

Besides Baltimore and Philadelphia, other cities have also begun shrinking the number of middle schools and increasing the K-8 schools. Dayton, Ohio, is in the process of eliminating all of its middle schools; New York has expanded 42 elementary schools to eighth grade and will close 14 of its failing middle schools.

Teachers are key

Summers believes the pitfall in creating K-8 schools is that the school might not be large enough to provide teachers who specialize. For instance, a math teacher in a small school might have to teach Algebra I and other levels of math, or math and science, and therefore might not be as experienced in teaching one subject.

And he said that sometimes the developmental needs of middle-schoolers are lost in K-8 schools.

"The desire to go to K-8 is fine as long as you treat them as early adolescents and not elementary school kids," he said.

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