

Will 6th graders be OK in a middle school setting?

What we hear

- 6th graders are developmentally ready for middle school.
- 6th graders have more learning opportunities in middle school.
- 6th graders can be separated from 7-8 graders by adjustments in the school schedule and class locations.
- Our teachers, Principals, and programs will ensure that our 6th graders in middle school will do just as well as if they remained in elementary school.
- The Lake Oswego School District will continue to enjoy the success that our school staff and community have created.

What we know

- Studies show that while some 6th graders may be more mature many are not ready for the decrease in supervision and the anxieties associated with new peer groups, new teachers, intensified expectations for both performance and individual responsibility and self-perception compared to older adolescents.
- Studies show that 6th graders in middle school perform significantly worse on standardized tests than their peers in elementary school.
- 6th graders in elementary schools benefit from their leadership roles and from their interactions with younger children as helpers and guides. Isolating 6th graders does not allow them opportunities for mentoring and leadership. Research also indicates that it is the transition into a much larger peer cohort that has negative effects.
- Middle Schools across the country have been trying to achieve this goal for decades by implementing special programs that are costly and a band-aid to the fundamental problem. In response to current research findings and parent pressure many school districts are now changing to K-6 elementary schools or K-8 configurations.
- While this is a hopeful statement it is absolutely impossible to know this and by the time we can have enough data to analyze this several classes of 6th graders will have been the guinea pigs in this experiment. If data shows poor performance changing back to K-6 will be very costly.

Research on school configurations over the past 20 years points in one direction; 6-8 middle school configurations, while popular until the early 2000's because of the flexibility they offer to school administrators, have had negative effects on our children. Many states are moving towards K-8 school configurations which more and more studies are showing to be superior to all other models. Most of the evidence supporting this configuration is coming from research on the negative effects of transitioning between schools and developmental incongruities between young adolescents and the middle school environment (increased freedom, less supervision, etc). Furthermore, research on the performance and behaviors of 6th graders supports the argument that we should leave our 6th graders in elementary school and not move to a middle school configuration regardless of budgetary problems.

This is a collection of studies that are easily found on-line and present a clear view that middle school configuration may be good for budgets but not good for children. It may appear that I have left out studies that show that there are positive academic or behavioral results from having 6th grade in middle schools but I have not. I have not found any and experts in the field of education and policy research have indicated that there are none (see attachments). There are many opinion articles supporting 6-8 middle schools but none are supported by empirical evidence and many have been written in order to support policy decisions by Middle School advocacy groups, such as the National Middle School Association. For example, the EdSource survey on top performing schools in California and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform's Policy Statement on Grade Configuration. The majority of articles and blog discussions about 6-8 middle school configurations are about Middle School Reform and developing teaching methods and special programs designed to lessen the negative academic and behavioral impacts experienced in middle school.

There will be costs, both tangible and intangible, if 6th grade is moved into middle school. These costs were not considered by the school configuration committee. Furthermore, according to members of the configuration committee there was never any discussion on the possible negative effects of moving the 6th grade into a middle school configuration. Even today, there has not been any open debate on whether middle schools fit into their primary objective: to do what is BEST for our children. Given the concerns raised in the articles you will find below how can we say that going to a middle school configuration will be better for our kids than what we know already works? – Phillip Hyun and Greg Tansey, LO United for Schools

Should Sixth Grade be in Elementary or Middle School? An Analysis of Grade Configuration and Student Behavior, Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University, Philip J. Cook, Robert MacCoun, Clara Muschkin, and Jacob Vigdor (Feb. 9, 2007)

Sixth graders placed in middle schools have more discipline problems and lower test scores than their peers who attend elementary schools, according to a study by researchers at Duke University and the University of California, Berkeley.

In addition, the negative effects of grouping sixth graders with older students are lasting and persist at least through ninth grade. Although the study didn't pinpoint the causes for the differences, the authors concluded that the 6-8 middle school structure brought impressionable sixth graders into routine contact with older adolescents who were a bad influence.

"These findings cast serious doubt on the wisdom of the historic nationwide shift to the grades 6-8 middle school format," said Philip Cook, Duke Professor of public policy and economics and an author of the paper. "What's been lacking in the debate is any real data on how the school configuration affects student behavior

and performance," Cook said. "As it turns out, moving sixth grade out of elementary school appears to have had substantial costs."

While controversial (according to the National Association of Middle Schools) the study is the only one of its kind that has been fully vetted and highly regarded in the field of public policy. In fact, the study won the 2008 Raymond Vernon Memorial award for the best public policy article in 2007 in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. Furthermore, the US Department of Education said that the study was "consistent with WWC evidence standards with reservations". Interestingly, the reservations were that "Despite statistical matching, there were still some differences in the characteristics of the two groups of schools. For example, middle schools were in larger districts and had fewer economically disadvantaged students." This is hardly "holes" in the study and in fact, middle schools were in larger more affluent districts and elementary schools were in more economically disadvantaged areas. This would actually cause their results to be skewed towards better middle school performance. More affluent students tend to have LESS behavioral problems and better test scores than economically disadvantaged children. This was confirmed by the study authors. See Attachments A, B, and C, which are e-mails that I exchanged with the authors of the Duke Study.

What Are We Doing to Early Adolescents? The impact of educational contexts on early adolescents. *American Journal of Education*, 99(4), 521-543, Eccles, J.S., Lord, S., & Midgley, C. (1991).

"For some children, the early adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral in school-related behaviors and motivation that often lead to academic failure and school dropout. Although these declines are not so extreme for most adolescents, there is sufficient evidence of gradual decline in various indicators of academic motivation, self perceptions, and school-related behaviors over the early adolescent years to make one ask why."

"Early adolescent development is characterized by increases in the following: desire for autonomy from adult control, especially from one's parents control; peer orientation, self-focus, self-consciousness, and salience-of-identity issues; concern over sexual relationships; and capacity for abstract cognitive activity."

"We believe the nature of these environmental changes, coupled with the normal course of individual development, results in a developmental mismatch so that the "fit" between the early adolescent and the classroom environment is particularly poor, which increases the risk of negative motivational outcomes, especially for adolescents already at some risk due to their prior school, family, and/or peer experiences."

Grade Configuration in K-12 Schools, The Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, McEntire, Nancy (2002)

The reference list in this article is excellent for digging deeper into the issue of school transition issues.

<http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/poptopics/gradeconfig.html>

- **Alspaugh (1999)** found a significant achievement loss during each transition year. He also found that some students regain what is lost in the following year, but it would seem that students who make fewer transitions need fewer years to make up for achievement losses caused by transitions.

- **Simmons & Blyth, (1987)** found that girls in early adolescence suffered from a drop in self-esteem, extracurricular participation, and leadership behaviors when they made the transition into middle school or junior high, **but not if they remained in an elementary school setting**. This study found that the effects of this transition lingered throughout the school years. For boys, **the study found similar negative effects in extracurricular participation and grades**, but not in self-esteem, when they made the transition into middle school or junior high. The authors concluded that the relatively protected elementary school setting made the entry into adolescence less stressful for both boys and girls. The students who had not had the stress of the earlier transition seemed to cope better with the transition into high school than did other students.
- **Franklin and Glascock (1996)** found that sixth-grade boys experienced more suspensions in middle schools or junior high schools than in elementary schools, possibly related to the effects of the transition, the school organization, or school size. This study was based on information gathered from all Louisiana public schools during the 1992-1993 school years.

Stuck in the Middle: Impacts of Grade Configuration in Public Schools, Columbia Business School and NBER, abstract, Jonah E. Rockoff, Benjamin B. Lockwood, August 2009.

http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20104_68.pdf

<http://academic.research.microsoft.com/Paper/5548772>

“We examine the implications of separating students of different grade levels across schools for the purposes of educational production. Specifically, we find that moving students from elementary to middle school in 6th or 7th grade causes significant drops in academic achievement. These effects are large (about 0.15 standard deviations), present for both math and English, and persist through grade 8, the last year for which we have achievement data. The effects are similar for boys and girls, but stronger for students with low levels of initial achievement. We instrument for middle school attendance using the grade range of the school students attended in grade 3, and employ specifications that control for student fixed effects. This leaves only one potential source of bias—correlation between grade range of a student's grade 3 school and unobservable characteristics that cause decreases in achievement precisely when students are due to switch schools—which we view as highly unlikely. We find little evidence that placing public school students into middle schools during adolescence is cost-effective.”

Are Middle Schools More Effective? The Impact of School Structure on Student Outcomes. Journal of Human Resources. 40, (3), 660-682, Bedard, Kelly, Do Chau, 2005.

“While nearly half of all school districts have adopted middle schools, there is little quantitative evidence of the efficacy of this educational structure. We estimate the impact of moving from a junior high school system, where students stay in elementary school longer, to a middle school system for on-time high school completion. This is a particularly good outcome measure because middle school advocates argued that this new system would be especially helpful for lower achieving students. In contrast to the stated objective, we find that moving to a middle school system decreases on-time high school completion by approximately 1–3 percent.”

The Middle School Mess, Education Next, Vol. 11, No. 1, Peter Meyer, 2011

A brand new article in Ed Next by Peter Meyer, "[The Middle School Mess](#)," explores how middle schools came to be, and how they came to be governed by a philosophy which deemphasizes academic outcomes.

The topics covered in the article are well summarized by a few paragraphs from the piece:

By all accounts, middle schools are a weak link in the chain of public education. Is it the churn of ill-conceived attempts at reform that's causing all the problems? Is it just hormones? Or is it the way in which we configure our grades? For most of the last 30 years, districts have opted to put "tweens" in a separate place, away from little tots and apart from the big kids. Middle schools typically serve grades 5–8 or 6–8. But do our quasi-mad preadolescents belong on an island—think *Lord of the Flies*—or in a big family, where even raging hormones can be mitigated by elders and self-esteem bolstered by little ones?

Parents and educators have begun abandoning the middle school for K–8 configurations, and new research suggests that grade configuration does matter: when this age group is gathered by the hundreds and educated separately, both behavior and learning suffer.

An Examination of K-5, 6-8 versus K-Grade Configurations, ERS Spectrum, V20 n2, 28-37, Connolly, Faith; Yakimowski-Srbenick, Mary E; Russo, Carmen V, 2002

Examines differences in certain factors such as student achievement and student attendance in K-8 versus K-5 and 6-8 grade configurations in Baltimore City Public Schools. Finds, for example, that students in K-8 schools had significantly higher reading, language arts, and mathematics scores than did students in K-5 and 6-8 schools.

There are many more studies that compare the K-8 configuration to middle schools but I am not listing them since there are so many and the K-8 configuration is not one of the options we are considering here in Lake Oswego. Why we are not considering K-8 configuration, however, is a valid question.

<http://www.ps101q.org/sltmay410.htm> **This link is to the meeting minutes of the P.S.101 School Leadership Team Meeting on May 4, 2010. This is a school district in Forest Hills, NY.**

The following is an excerpt from the meeting minutes:

VI. Truncation and Middle School "Choice":

The principal, several teachers, and parents attended the April 29th C.E.C. meeting held at Russell Sage. The meeting was initially announced as focusing on truncation of elementary schools, that is, eliminating 6th grades from elementary schools. However, late in the afternoon on April 29th, the C.E.C. changed the agenda and stated the meeting would focus only on the issue of "Middle School Choice." It was announced at the C.E.C. meeting that the decision of eliminating 6th grades would be left to the elementary school SLTs.

The D.O.E. also held meeting with principals throughout District 28. Principals were told that the key reason for the D.O.E. pushing "Choice" was that, according to the D.O.E., test scores for children tend to drop the first year they hit middle school so it is better to begin this transition early so kids can become used to the new routine and test better in that important 7th grade year when they take the test for specialized high schools.

However, parents noted that while they have heard this from the D.O.E., there is no evidence for this. The D.O.E. has never provided any documentation that student scores drop during this transition or that they improve with time. Moreover, the Duke study (the one major, vetted study that asks whether 6th grade students perform better in elementary school or middle school) found that students performed better on standardized tests when they remain in elementary schools and have fewer behavioral issues. Importantly, this difference persists through the 9th grade (that is, kids who attended 6th grade in elementary school had higher tests scores and fewer behavioral issues in 9th grade when compared with the 9th graders who attended 6th grade in middle school).

Oddly, even D.O.E. data suggest students perform significantly better on state tests when left in their elementary schools. However, the D.O.E. does not publicize this data (the P.A. had to request the data). According to the D.O.E.:

6th Grade Performance on State Tests

(% of students receiving 3s or 4s)

	ELA	MATH
6th graders in middle school	69.1%	73.4%
6th graders in elementary schools	79.3%	86.5%

The D.O.E.'s motivation appears to be to try and fill up underutilized middle school classrooms.

Other on-line articles on K-6 vs. 6-8 school configurations:

<http://www.examiner.com/high-schools-in-norfolk/should-the-sixth-grade-be-a-part-of-elementary-school>

"An assistant principal, currently the assistant principal in Portsmouth Virginia, believes that having 6th graders in an elementary school is a welcomed change. According to him, many educators believe that they are better suited with 7th & 8th graders, but he believes that statistic show that they have less behavior problem and function well academically. He continues to state that 6th grade plays a pivotal role in the area of math and believes that it is the foundation of higher math. In the six grade more emphasis is placed on fraction, percents, and algebra concepts than any other grades. Thus, keeping 6th graders in elementary school tend to mature students more than middle-school children and may prove to be an advantage to district that wish to transition to 6th grade gradually into the middle school.

<http://cspf.wordpress.com/analysis-5th-6th-grade/>

Some nice graphs here are showing negative behavior and academic performance data in 6th graders in elementary school vs. middle school.

http://www.dailybreeze.com/news/ci_14327421

This is an excerpt from a Feb. 5, 2010 article about Los Angeles Unified School District's plan to allow 10 schools to reconfigure to a K-6 format:

The elementary schools would be the first LAUSD campuses in the South Bay to return to a K-6 configuration since the district reorganized schools in the 1980s and '90s. In recent years, schools elsewhere in the sprawling district have been reconfigured to K-6 - about 12 percent of LAUSD elementaries.

The local plan is sort of a pilot project that could eventually be expanded to other schools with adequate space for sixth-graders, Romero said. The initiative has the approval of Superintendent Ramon Cortines, who was unavailable to comment.

The change has been spearheaded in part by Board of Education member Richard Vladovic, who represents the Harbor Area, Carson, Gardena and Lomita. A longtime educator, Vladovic said he never embraced the idea of middle school.

"We're forcing kids to grow up too fast," Vladovic said. "In 40 years, I've heard it so much: Why are we rushing them? Many have said to me, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we could keep them back?'"

Vladovic calls the process "deconfiguration," and frames the issue as a matter of parent choice.

<http://www.examiner.com/urban-policy-in-new-york/the-sixth-grade-score-drop-how-one-principal-addressed-the-middle-school-transition-problem>

This excerpt is from a Nov, 2010 article on the middle school 6th grade score drop and how one principal is addressing the problem:

"To combat the sixth grade score drop, a few districts across the country have started experimenting with different public school structures. In Portland, Oregon, for instance, six middle schools were phased out and over two dozen elementary schools were transformed into K-8 schools, a process called "reconfiguration." Other reconfiguration proposals include creating a separate school for fourth, fifth and sixth graders or reeling sixth grade into elementary schools so that a K-6 format supplants the K-5.

<http://www.edmondsun.com/local/x1531219078/Deer-Creek-adopts-new-grade-groups>

This article from Dec. 16, 2010 is about how the Deer Creek School Board worked together with the community and made decisions on their school re-configurations based on a thorough review of research studies and community input.

"Everyone entered with an open mind as we pulled data from across the nation as well as using the Duke Study on grade grouping," said Toni Jones, chief academic officer.

Deer Creek Middle School will become the fifth- and sixth-grade center while the seventh and eighth graders will move to the new building now under construction.

"I think the developmental appropriateness of having sixth-graders with fifth is giving them the extra time to mature as adolescents in an environment that is appropriate for fifth- and sixth-grade," Toni Jones said. "I am very excited about the new facility and the enhancement it brings for seventh- and eighth-graders."

The team began meeting with more than 350 people in 24 groups including patrons, parents, teachers, administrators and school board members as well as about 25 mothers of elementary students.”

ATTACHMENT A

This is a chain of e-mail communications with the primary author of the Duke study, Philip Cook. Dr. Cook received his PhD in economics from UC Berkeley and BA from the University of Michigan and serves as Senior Associate Dean for Faculty and Research at the Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy

Sun, January 16, 2011 12:28:10 PM

RE: Should 6th graders by in Elementary or Middle School?

From: Philip Cook <pcook@duke.edu>

Add to Contacts

To: Phil Hyun <maprik_2000@yahoo.com>

Phil, I'm not aware of any good statistical studies that find that students who attend 6th grade in middle school perform better or behave better than they would if they had attended 6th grade in elementary school.

Best wishes,
Phil C.

From: Phil Hyun [mailto:maprik_2000@yahoo.com]

Sent: Sunday, January 16, 2011 2:41 PM

To: Philip Cook

Cc: Clara Muschkin, Ph.D.

Subject: Re: Should 6th graders by in Elementary or Middle School?

Dear Dr. Cook,

Thank you for your timely response and for the additional support! Are you aware of any studies that show 6th graders performing better in Middle School?

I truly appreciate your comments and assistance. We really want to preserve our K-6 elementary schools.

Best Regards,

Phil Hyun

On Jan 15, 2011, at 12:30 PM, Philip Cook <pcook@duke.edu> wrote:

Phillip,

I'm glad to provide what help I can.

You might point out that our study won the Raymond Vernon Memorial Award as the best article published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* of that year. So our peers thought highly of this work.

Of course it is not perfect. We could not run a randomized controlled field experiment. So we did the best we could. But our statistical design is quite strong. We are looking at the progress of individual students as they go through the grades. The kids' trajectories with respect to behavior and test scores are much more favorable for those who did 6th grade in elementary school, than those who moved to middle school in 6th grade.

Supporting evidence: Bedard and Do (2005) published an article in the *Journal of Human Resources* that finds that students who move to middle school in 6th grade are less likely to graduate on time from high school.

Good luck with your effort!

Best wishes,
Phil Cook

From: Phillip Hyun [mailto:maprik_2000@yahoo.com]
Sent: Saturday, January 15, 2011 1:52 PM
To: Philip Cook
Subject: Should 6th graders be in Elementary or Middle School?

Dear Dr. Cook,

My name is Phillip Hyun and I live in [Lake Oswego, OR](#). I am trying to learn more about this subject of 6th graders in elementary school versus middle school and I read your paper with great interest. I don't have a background in education so all of my information gathering has been from what is available on the web. I am trying to gather information for our School District Board while we are deliberating the pros and cons of moving our 6th grade into Middle School. As you might imagine it is quite a heated debate in our district.

From what I can find, the Duke study is the only one that actually uses empirical data to draw its conclusions. I have read many articles with anecdotal information and theories about childhood stages of development etc., but no other studies like yours, supporting or refuting your findings.

Can you assist me by pointing out any other interesting articles or studies on this subject? Have there been strong criticisms of the validity of your study? I read the reservations cited on the US Department of Education website, but they seem to imply that the study couldn't control every factor, including the differences in the district's management, and other intangibles... Also, they say that more of the middle school 6th graders came from more affluent schools. Wouldn't this actually skew the study in favor of the 6th graders in middle school?

Anyway, I would greatly appreciate your comments, ideas, and suggestions as I try to find as much accurate information regarding this topic as possible.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Phillip Hyun

ATTACHMENT B

This is a chain of e-mails communications with Jacob Vigdor, an author of the Duke Study and Professor of Public Policy and Economics, Director of Graduate Studies/PhD program at Duke University School of Public Policy. Dr. Vigdor's area of expertise is Education and he received his PhD in Economics from Harvard University and a BS in Policy Analysis from Cornell University.

Mon, January 17, 2011 12:24:49 PM

Re: Should 6th Grade be in Elementary of Middle School?

From: Jacob Vigdor <jacob.vigdor@duke.edu>

Add to Contacts

To: Phillip Hyun <maprik_2000@yahoo.com>

Dear Mr. Hyun:

There have been a couple of other [empirical studies](#) on this subject. Our study cites earlier work by Bedard and Do, published in the Journal of Human Resources, which found results very similar to our own. There has also been a study of students in New York City public schools, which utilize a wide variety of grade configurations, which also show that earlier transitions to middle school are associated with poorer academic outcomes.

The concern you raise, that the students transitioning to middle school in 6th grade appear more affluent than others, is probably the most important one we've heard. You are correct to infer that this suggests we understate the negative impacts of early transitions on behavioral and academic outcomes.

Overall, the [empirical evidence](#) clearly points to the conclusion that sixth graders are best off in elementary school. It is true that there haven't been any studies of this question using experimental methods -- [random assignment](#) of students to schools -- that the [department of education](#) favors, but all available evidence points in one direction.

In my experience, most districts contemplating a grade reconfiguration do so not because they think it will be good for children, but rather to deal with space utilization issues. Grade reconfiguration often appears to be a quick fix, particularly in situations where [elementary schools](#) are over capacity and secondary schools are not. In the short run, reconfiguration is certainly cheaper than building a new school -- and in today's budget climate, it is difficult for many school districts to think about the long run. [Given the clear evidence of educational costs to children, however, it is certainly prudent to examine alternatives.](#)

Please let me know if I can provide you with any further commentary on this matter.

Sincerely,

Jake Vigdor

Jacob L. Vigdor, Ph.D.
Professor of Public Policy and Economics
[Duke University](#)
Box 90312
Durham, NC 27708
(919)613-9226
[jacob.vigdor.googlepages.com](#)

On Sat, Jan 15, 2011 at 1:42 PM, Phillip Hyun <[maprik_2000@yahoo.com](#)> wrote:

Dear Dr. Vigdor,

My name is Phillip Hyun and I live in [Lake Oswego, OR](#). I am trying to learn more about this subject of 6th graders in elementary school versus middle school and I read your paper with great interest. I don't have a background in education so all of my information gathering has been from what is available on the web. I am trying to gather information for our School District Board while we are deliberating the pros and cons of moving our 6th grade into Middle School. As you might imagine it is quite a heated debate in our district.

From what I can find, the Duke study is the only one that actually uses empirical data to draw its conclusions. I have read many articles with anecdotal information and theories about childhood stages of development etc., but no other studies like yours, supporting or refuting your findings.

Can you assist me by pointing out any other interesting articles or studies on this subject? Have there been strong criticisms of the validity of your study? I read the reservations cited on the US [Department of Education website](#), but they seem to imply that the study couldn't control every factor, including the differences in the district's management, and other intangibles... Also, they say that more of the middle school 6th graders came from more affluent schools. Wouldn't this actually skew the study in favor of the 6th graders in middle school?

Anyway, I would greatly appreciate your comments, ideas, and suggestions as I try to find as much accurate information regarding this topic as possible.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Phillip Hyun

ATTACHMENT C

This is a chain of e-mail communications with Clara Muschkin, Assistant Research Professor of Public Policy Studies and Faculty at Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy and Director of the North Carolina Education Research Center. She received her PhD from Duke University and BA from the College of William and Mary.

Tue, January 18, 2011 7:45:49 AM

RE: Should 6th Graders be in Elementary or Middle School?

From: Clara Muschkin <muschkin@duke.edu>

Add to Contacts

To: Phillip Hyun <maprik_2000@yahoo.com>

Cc: "Philip Cook, Ph.D." <pcook@duke.edu>

Dear Mr. Hyun,

I was out of town and just catching up on email—and I am very glad that Phil Cook has replied to you already. The only thing that I would add to Phil's comments is to confirm what you observed, that in our study the 6th graders who went to middle school did in fact come from elementary schools that were more affluent than the 6th graders who went to elementary school. As you note, this initial difference should work in favor of the middle school 6th graders; however, in both behavior and test scores the middle school 6th graders lost this initial advantage and moved to significant disadvantage in comparisons of their trajectories with those of the elementary school 6th graders.

I join Phil in wishing you and the school board the best of luck with your decision. If you have a moment, I would very much like to know the outcome.

Best Regards,

Clara Muschkin



Clara G. Muschkin, Ph.D.
Director, North Carolina Education Research Data Center
Center for Child and Family Policy
Assistant Research Professor of Public Policy
Sanford School of Public Policy
Duke University

From: Phillip Hyun [mailto:maprik_2000@yahoo.com]

Sent: Saturday, January 15, 2011 1:56 PM

To: muschkin@duke.edu

Subject: Should 6th Graders be in Elementary or Middle School?

Dear Dr. Muschkin,

My name is Phillip Hyun and I live in [Lake Oswego, OR](#). I am trying to learn more about this subject of 6th graders in elementary school versus middle school and I read your paper with great interest. I don't have a background in education so all of my information gathering has been from what is available on the web. I am trying to gather information for our School District Board while we are deliberating the pros and cons of moving our 6th grade into Middle School. As you might imagine it is quite a heated debate in our district.

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Anyway, I would greatly appreciate your comments, ideas, and suggestions as I try to find as much accurate information regarding this topic as possible.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Phillip Hyun

ATTACHMENT D

This is an e-mail communication with a Harvard University Researcher who has done a substantial state-wide study examining the effects of school configurations in Florida. His research results have not yet been formally released.

From: Martin West [mailto:westma@gse.harvard.edu]
Sent: Saturday, March 05, 2011 11:39 AM
To: Greg Tansey
Subject: RE: middle schools

Greg,

See below for a few comments that you're welcome to use as useful. Feel free to edit as needed as long as you send it back to me to approve.

Thanks,
Marty

I had long been skeptical of the idea that school grade configurations could have an important influence on student outcomes. Over the past several years, however, a series of rigorous studies conducted in multiple settings convinced me that I was wrong.

My own forthcoming research uses statewide data from Florida to compare students switching from elementary to middle schools in grades 6 or 7 to students attending K-8 schools. I find that student test scores drop sharply in the exact year they move to a middle school. I also find that students learn substantially less each year in a middle school than students in K-8 settings, despite the fact that those same students learned more than K-8 students when they were in elementary school. Finally, a unique contribution of my research is that it shows that the achievement decline caused by moving to middle school persists through grade 10, by which time virtually all students have transitioned into high school.

My own work in Florida, combined with other recent evidence from New York City and North Carolina, tells a consistent story. First, the transition to middle school causes a notable drop in student achievement and behavior. Second, students learn less on average in a typical middle school than in a typical K-8 school. While both findings suggest that a K-8 grade configuration is likely to be the best possible arrangement for student outcomes, they also counsel strongly against changes to grade configuration that would lead students to spend additional time in middle school settings. To my knowledge, there is no rigorous research whatsoever that points in the opposite direction of these findings.

It is tempting to suggest that districts extending middle school exposure could simply adopt a plan to mitigate any negative consequences. Importantly, however, this same body of research has been much less successful in explaining why the transition to middle school is so hard and why middle schools are less effective. Absent such an explanation, educators should not be confident in their ability to address the underlying problem.

In light of this evidence, I have been encouraged by the recent decision of several large school districts to eliminate middle schools altogether in favor of K-8 configurations. It is clear to me that extending the time students spend in middle schools is a decision that should not be taken lightly or made in response to short-term budgetary pressures.

Martin West
Assistant Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Deputy Director, Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard Kennedy School

ATTACHMENT E

This is an e-mail communication with Jonah Rockoff of Columbia University, one of the co-authors of the article *Stuck in the Middle: Impacts of Grade Configuration in Public Schools*. It is a response to the analysis of the Duke Study by Dr. Mondeaux on behalf of the LOSD.

From: Rockoff, Jonah [mailto:jr2331@columbia.edu]
Sent: Thursday, March 03, 2011 1:36 PM
To: Greg Tansey
Subject: RE: middle schools

Greg,

I'm probably not up for a YouTube video, but I would be happy to continue to help inform the local dialogue. Here are few responses to the comments provided by your local statistician.

1. The comment that differences in incident reporting could make 6th graders in middle appear to have worse behavior is correct, and one that the authors address: "It seems reasonable to suppose that middle schools tend to be more formal and severe than elementary schools, which might explain the infraction gap between 6Es and 6Ms in sixth grade. However, it does not explain why that gap persists in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, when all the students have moved on past elementary school. Hence we believe that the observed behavior gap is not an artifact of different school reporting practices."

2. The comment that the concentration of older students who exert bad influences will vary from school to school is of course true. I'm not sure exposure to older students is the issue, but, if it were, then the question is whether you believe you have too few badly behaved older students in Lake Oswego to worry about this problem. Of course, the definition of badly behaved may be different across schools (e.g., fist fights vs. gun fights), but my sense is that most districts have their fair share of what they would locally define as badly behaved students.

3. I agree with the comment that if the behavioral effects of middle school are due to exposure then limiting exposure within the school will mitigate the problem. However, I think that the results from NYC and Florida suggest that school transition, mixing with new peers, and other aspects of entry in middle schools may be more important than exposure to older peers. If we thought exposure to older students at young ages was the only issue, then K-8 students should have the worst outcomes (e.g., 3rd-5th graders mix with 8th graders), but that is the opposite of what we see. The research also suggests that when this transition occurs at 6th grade it tends to be worse than having the transition occur in 7th grade, and the optimal outcome is to avoid the transition altogether through a K-8 structure.

4. It is true that the NC study is not a scientific experiment, but that is a pretty high bar for evidence if we are talking about whether middle schools are good for kids, since this is not something that is easily manipulated in a laboratory. The main issue in deciding whether the NC conclusions are valid is whether you think there is something special about the places that have K-5/6-8 configurations that makes those kids behave worse from grade 6 through grade 9 than their K-6/7-8 counterparts. If anything, K-5/6-8 students were BETTER behaved than the K-6/7-8 students in grades 4 and 5 (see Figure 3 of the NC paper), so it's not obvious that they would be worse behaved at older ages, particularly in grade 9 when everyone has moved to high school. That doesn't guarantee that the study's conclusions are correct, but they pass most of the obvious potential criticisms of their methodology.

I do agree that the NC study is not strong enough in isolation to merit forcing any policy decision. However, there are three other well-done studies (NYC and Florida, plus a nationwide study by Bedard and Do) pointing to negative effects of middle schools (not to mention a bunch of less-well done studies with similar findings) and a considerable movement away from middle school in various districts across the nation. This is, I would argue, worth taking into account in making policy decisions, and begs the question of whether

there is any evidence to the contrary. I do not know of any studies that purport to show that middle schools are more effective, nor that sending students to middle school in grade 6 is better than sending them in grade 7. All of the existing studies suggest the opposite is true.

Hope that is helpful.

Best,
Jonah

ATTACHMENT F

Re: Should 6th graders be in Elementary or Middle School?

From: Jacob Vigdor <jacob.vigdor@duke.edu>

To: Phillip Hyun <maprik_2000@yahoo.com>

Cc: Philip Cook <pcook@duke.edu>; Clara Muschkin <muschkin@duke.edu>; Greg Tansey <gtansey@riverlakepartners.com>

Dear Phillip:

Thanks for sharing this critique with us. My co-authors and I have no ideological axe to grind on this issue. We conducted the study with no pre-determined conception of what the findings would be. Since publishing the study, however, we have received numerous requests for consultation from school administrators, school board members, principals, students, and parents who have commented on how our results confirm their own suspicions.

A couple of years ago, I was retained as an expert witness by a parent group that sued their school board, seeking an injunction against a plan to switch 5th and 6th grade students from elementary schools to [middle schools](#). The parents won their case. I will be the first to tell you that our study is not perfect, however we take great pains to enumerate the study's flaws in the study itself. This is the scholarly ideal.

I interpret Dr. Mondeaux's four points as follows:

1) We don't know much about specific policies and practices behind the filing of discipline reports. This is true, and a limitation we clearly disclose in the study. We also note, however, that one would have to believe that middle schools serving 6th graders systematically dispense harsher punishment for the same behavior -- for all students up to 8th grade -- to think that our results reflect only policy differences and not behavior differences. If you believe that, ask yourself the following question: why would these schools feel the need to discipline students so harshly? The logical response is that they feel they must impose harsh discipline to deter severe classroom disruptions. This argument is fully detailed in the paper.

2 & 3) We don't test the hypothesis that the [negative effect](#) of being a 6th grader in middle school varies across middle schools. This is true. We measure the "average" effect; the effect may be more modest in some schools -- but only if it is simultaneously larger in other schools. This is entirely plausible. But in the absence of more detailed evidence, to rest one's case for reconfiguration on this point is to plan on being lucky.

4) We didn't conduct a randomized experiment. That, too, is correct. No researcher has conducted a randomized experiment on this question.

In summary, it is fairly easy to critique data analysis exercises such as ours. That is a big part of what I do for a living. In certain cases, however, the body of evidence produced across multiple studies leaves very little doubt as to what the scientific truth might be, and this is one of those cases. We are aware of several studies besides our own that reach the same conclusion: earlier transitions are harmful to children's academic and behavioral trajectories. There are many proposed methods of mitigating this risk, but there is simply no evidence as to whether they are successful, and it is reasonable to think that many of them were tried in the schools we studied in North Carolina.

In your district, sending [sixth grade students](#) to middle school may save some amount of money. But it will put those students at risk. Foresight and planning might mitigate that risk, but we have no evidence to indicate that it can be eliminated.

Sincerely,

Jake Vigdor

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