



# Problems and Promise of the American Middle School

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**T**oday in the United States, nearly nine million students attend public “middle schools”—schools that serve as an intermediary phase between elementary school and high school, typically consisting of grades 6–8. The middle school years represent a critical time for young teens. Middle schools have been blamed for the increase in student behavior problems and cited as the cause of teens’ alienation, disengagement from school, and low achievement.

What are America’s middle schools really like? RAND Education researchers undertook a comprehensive assessment of the American middle school, made particularly timely and important by the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which emphasizes test-based accountability and sanctions for failing schools. The researchers describe their findings in *Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School*. The RAND Corporation report includes some practical advice about how to deal with the challenges middle schools face and proposes a research agenda that might yield additional information for improving the schools.

## The State of the American Middle School

In the 1980s, reformers endorsed a new middle school “concept” intended to change the traditional junior high school to create an educational experience more appropriate for young adolescents. The goal was to make the old junior high more developmentally responsive by changing the grade configuration from grades 7–8 or 7–9 to grades 6–8 and introducing new organizational and instructional practices (e.g., interdisciplinary team teaching).

Today, many schools are organized around the 6–8 configuration, and the well-being of middle school students generates tremendous interest from committed educators, innovative reformers, and

### Abstract

What is the state of the American middle school? In *Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School*, RAND researchers identified middle schools’ major concerns and recommended ways to improve students’ academic achievement, communicate with parents, and support teachers and principals. Middle schools are not in the state of crisis described in some media accounts, and credible reform efforts are under way. However, significant issues remain.

private foundations. However, in spite of these well-intentioned improvement efforts, middle schools do not yet fully serve the needs of young teens, and several challenges remain. RAND’s main findings and recommendations are summarized below.

## Separating the Middle Grades Is Associated with Transition Problems

The history of reform indicates that a separate middle school has become the norm more because of societal and demographic pressures than because of scientific evidence supporting the need for a separate school for young teens. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that separate schools and the transitions they require can cause problems that negatively affect students’ developmental and academic progress. RAND recommends that, over the coming years, states and school districts consider alternatives to the 6–8 structure to reduce multiple transitions for students and allow schools to better align their goals across grades K–12.

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Corporate Headquarters  
1700 Main Street  
P.O. Box 2138  
Santa Monica, California  
90407-2138  
TEL 310.393.0411  
FAX 310.393.4818

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## Progress on Academic Outcomes Is Uneven

Data show slow but steady increases in achievement scores since the 1970s. However, about 70 percent of American 8th-grade public-school students fail to reach proficient levels of performance in reading, mathematics, and science on national achievement tests. This is particularly true for Latinos and African Americans, who continue to lag behind their white counterparts, even when their parents have had college educations. We recommend adoption of various forms of supplemental services that have been proven effective for the lowest-performing students, including summer school programs before 6th grade and additional reading and math courses after 6th grade.

## Conditions for Learning Are Suboptimal

*Conditions for learning* are factors that can enhance or diminish a student's ability to learn. Particularly relevant to young teens are motivational and social-emotional indicators of well-being that are related to academic performance. Disengagement and social alienation not only are related to low achievement but also predict dropping out. National school safety statistics suggest that physical conflict is especially problematic in middle schools, and student concerns about safety predict emotional distress that can compromise academic performance. Such findings underscore the need to examine a variety of student outcomes in addition to academic indicators. Schools need to adopt comprehensive prevention models (e.g., schoolwide antibullying programs) that focus on changing the social norms that foster antisocial behavior.

## The Vision of the Middle School Has Not Been Fully Implemented

The continuing lackluster performance of middle schools might also be explained, in part, by inadequate implementation of the middle school concept in most districts and schools.<sup>1</sup> Core practices such as interdisciplinary team teaching and advisory programs tend to be weakly implemented with little attention to the underlying goals. A sufficient level of fidelity to many of the reform practices is not possible without substantial additional attention, resources, and long-term support.

<sup>1</sup> R. D. Felner, A. W. Jackson, D. Kasak, P. Mulhall, S. Brand, and N. Flowers, "The Impact of School Reform for the Middle Years: Longitudinal Study of a Network Engaged in Turning Points-Based Comprehensive School Transformation," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 78, No. 7, 1997, pp. 528–550, and R. Williamson and J. H. Johnston, "Challenging Orthodoxy: An Emerging Agenda for Middle Level Reform," *Middle School Journal*, March 1999, pp. 10–17.

## Middle School Teachers and Principals Lack Appropriate Training and Support

Many middle school teachers do not have a major, minor, or certification in the subjects they teach or training in the development of young adolescents. Evidence-based models of professional development for teachers should be adopted to improve the subject-area expertise and the pedagogical skills of teachers.

Principals face similar training issues, in addition to another challenge: Disciplinary issues increase a principal's workload and can decrease the time and effort the individual has to spend on other leadership functions. Different management approaches need to be considered that permit principals to delegate their managerial duties and foster a school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning.

## Parental Support Wanes

Research shows that parental involvement declines as students progress through school and that middle schools do less than elementary schools do to engage parents. Middle schools should provide information about school practices and offer concrete suggestions for activities that parents and teens can do together at home.

## New Reform Models Show Promise

Our review of whole-school reforms and professional development practices identified some promising models that address both academic achievement and the development needs of young teens. If fully implemented, these models might propel our schools forward toward the high levels of achievement that are the goal of NCLB.

## Looking Ahead

Today's emphasis on higher standards (such as those NCLB articulates) and on increased accountability through academic testing poses at least two challenges for middle schools. First, as legislation focused solely on academic achievement outcomes holds greater sway, the developmental needs of children might take second place, even though the two are highly interrelated. Second, it is unclear whether adequate federal and state supports are available for schools and students to meet the new standards. Regardless of the nature and scope of the next middle-grade reform efforts, state and federal support is needed at this time, and the efforts of various agencies, organizations, and foundations should be well coordinated. Continuity of effort is likely to provide the right conditions for student growth, institutional improvement, and educational progress. While NCLB creates a feeling of urgency, that urgency should be translated into steady, reasoned attempts to improve the schooling of all our young teens. ■

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This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School* by Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kaganoff, Catherine Augustine, and Louay Constant, MG-139-EDU (available at [www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG139/](http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG139/)), 2004, 152 pages, \$27.50, ISBN: 0-8330-3390-5. MG-139 is also available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310-451-7002; toll free: 877-584-8642; or email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.