



# The Politics and Sustainability of Middle Grades Reforms

Jennifer I. Friend & Sue C. Thompson

Jennifer's first years as a middle school principal occurred during a time of transformation initiated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act and further intensified by demographic changes within her Midwest suburban district of 25,000 students. In the context of national educational reform during this time period, Tom Erb asked, "Who will advocate for the best interests of young adolescents?" (2002, p. 4). This question held particular significance in the Sunflower School District (a pseudonym), as the superintendent and board of education decided to dismantle certain middle grades structures and practices that had been sustained for 20 years. Schools returned to a departmentalized schedule with stratified academic classes and, during this same academic year, advisory programs were discontinued in favor of a study hall period.

In this article, we describe how the Sunflower School District fell prey to the "pendulum model" of educational reform efforts (Slavin, 1989), dismantling the interdisciplinary teaming structure despite findings from relevant research studies that suggest teaming is necessary to meet the needs of young adolescents and to achieve academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity (Erb, 2006; Flowers,

Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

## From junior high to middle school

The Sunflower School District recognized that middle grades education should be distinctive due to the unique needs of young adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), and in the mid-1980s a committee of teachers, counselors, and administrators investigated the possibility of changing from a junior high model to the middle school concept. The committee visited effective middle level schools in the region and in nearby states and consulted with middle level education experts. After much deliberation involving district level administrators, building administrators, teachers, parents, and community members, the district reorganized its middle level schools according to a teaming model grounded in the middle school concept. The changes included the implementation of an advisory program and an intramural program, a revision of the exploratory curriculum, and renaming the junior high schools to indicate that changes were taking place both inside and outside the building.

---

**This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics:** Shared Vision—Courageous & Collaborative Leaders—Organizational Structures

## **A mixed reception**

The teachers in the new middle schools knew that one goal of the reorganization was to develop ways to show students connections among separate subjects through interdisciplinary units. This meant they would have one planning time for the team and one individual planning time. However, moving from a departmental organizational structure to an interdisciplinary structure affected more than the way the curriculum was to be delivered. Some administrators were reassigned to different buildings or levels, and the district offered staff development to assist teachers in making the transition to a middle school philosophy and program. Cadres of teacher-experts were formed to provide inservice professional development on effective instruction and cooperative learning. Although these instructional strategies should have been familiar to teachers of young adolescents, regardless of the organization of the school, leaders felt that moving to the middle school model provided an opportunity to stress the importance of active, engaged learning.

Teachers responded to the changes with differing attitudes. One teacher described how she felt about the impending changes when she heard about them during her first year teaching in the district, which was the final year for the junior high model.

I remember there was a boy named John failing my English class. I wrote notes to six teachers. It took me seven days to get responses back, and by that time, I had already figured out a different way to reach John. When I first heard that interdisciplinary teams would be meeting every day, having that communication system sounded great. (K. J., personal communication, November 7, 2005)

Not every team had a positive experience. As one teacher stated, “The first year was really rough for some people, because they were placed on teams with teachers they didn’t like. So, as a result, it seemed every year that they had to mix up teams to deal with personality issues” (E. C., personal communication, November 12, 2005). A teacher who had been on a strong team for four years expressed frustration at being reconfigured by the principal. “It was like a lawnmower that was working—you don’t take the parts and break them up to fix other broken ones ... you end up with all broken ones” (W. X., personal communication, November 14, 2005).

Some perceived the transition to middle school in the 1980s as detrimental to the school community.

Individuals were part of a “team” rather than part of a “school.” For teachers, students, and parents who were involved with interschool sports teams, the change to an intramural program was viewed as a huge loss. Many stakeholders seemed to forget that the ninth grade students, who had been moved to the high school to create middle schools composed of seventh and eighth graders, were now playing on freshman interschool teams just as they did at the junior high school. As in many districts that transitioned from the junior high model to the middle school model, after the initial group of students had moved through the new middle school, the negativity greatly dissipated.

Some stakeholders were worried that the change to the middle school concept represented a watering down of the curriculum. There would no longer be final examinations, and a new required course titled Communications was to be implemented as a second daily language arts class. Selected language arts teachers were given three days of release time to write the curriculum for the new communications class. A teacher who participated in the process stated that this was not nearly enough time. “Some of these people thought it was just going to be the reading program with a new name, which left all the speech teachers out in the cold—it was like, what are they going to do?” (E. X., personal communication, November 29, 2005).

With the advent of teaming, some divisions among faculty remained, because “core” teachers of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies were teaming, and “elective” teachers of classes such as physical education, business, art, and music continued to teach in isolation. One elective teacher stated, “We had always been on our own, and when we went to teams, we were still on our own” (N. D., personal communication, November 7, 2005). Some of the individual teams or schools developed strategies to include these teachers, but there was no system-wide process to engage all teachers in team planning. Many schools partnered special education resource teachers with interdisciplinary teams to improve communication and better meet the needs of students with Individualized Education Plans.

## **Benefits of teaming**

Teaming and advisory helped change public perceptions of the schools. The new middle schools were viewed as more nurturing for students who were in the



Teams of teachers work collaboratively during the school day when they have organizational supports like common planning time.

developmental stage of early adolescence. One student who attended a district junior high school the year prior to the change to teaming described the lack of help as a real concern. “You had to handle problems yourself. There was a fear that the system won’t work. There were bullies and kids doing drugs, but you couldn’t turn anyone in” (S. E., personal communication, November 8, 2005).

With teaming, teachers met daily with advisory groups of 10 to 15 students. Each advisory created banners with student names that were displayed in the cafeteria. Teachers made phone calls to parents to establish open lines of communication. Coordinators within each building created lesson plans to address developmental and social needs. One advisory teacher stated that, while some teachers were uncomfortable with the idea that students did not receive a grade for the class, overall advisory was a good connector with the students. “We got connected to them easily, and they would come to us for help and advice” (E. E., personal communication, November 14, 2005).

Teaming and advisory made schools more responsive to students’ social and developmental needs, but academic benefits were also evident. Some teaching teams embraced the opportunity to implement interdisciplinary units of instruction, and certain middle schools developed high-achieving “Dream Teams” or “Golden Teams” that modeled strength in curricular areas and in collaboration. For example, a language arts teacher

described a Colonial America project that involved students and parents at a high level of participation.

We smoked a turkey and dressed up like colonists, and students designed games that kids would play in 1775. There wasn’t technology then, but the students did display work, created toys of the time, and we had a big feast. We had a lot of positive interaction with the kids. (E. E., personal communication, November 14, 2005)

Another teacher recalled getting together with team colleagues at her house to make gingerbread cookies for all the students at the end of the school year.

We gave the kids cookies on the last day of school before they went home. I felt a lot closer to the kids, being able to work as a team if you had a discipline problem, or a kid was struggling in your class. It was so wonderful to find out you weren’t the only one, or they had an idea for how to handle it because they had a rapport with the kids. (E. X., personal communication, November 29, 2005)

Parents saw benefits to having a team for communication about students’ needs. All teachers could attend one conference, or selected team members could get input from all teachers to meet with parents or students who were intimidated by a large conference group.

Having the same students twice a day and discussing with colleagues helped with figuring out learning styles, and it was easier to adjust what you were doing. That was important. I think before teams, the kids felt like they were drowning. (E. E., personal communication, November 14, 2005)

## Dismantling middle grades reform

While teachers, students, and parents had positive experiences with teaming, support for teaming and the middle school concept dwindled at the district level with the arrival of a new superintendent in the late 1990s. The superintendent, who came from a district with junior high schools, began requesting documentation related to the effectiveness of the middle school model. Interdisciplinary teaching teams were required to provide school administrators minutes from their daily team planning sessions, and principals, in turn, provided the district with information that demonstrated that the team planning time was supporting school improvement initiatives. In terms of professional development for

middle grades teachers, the district level teacher cadres were dissolved, and individual building principals became responsible for most staff development. The majority of new middle school principals hired in the district had backgrounds in high school, which may have contributed to a loss of building-level support for effective elements of middle school structure and philosophy.

In the fall of 2001, district leadership appointed a committee of three central office administrators, three middle school principals, and two resource specialists to develop an alternative scheduling project. Unlike the 1980s middle school reform study, teachers and parents were not represented on this new committee, and the committee did not include those middle school principals who were the strongest supporters of the middle school concept. The committee's recommendations concerning alternative scheduling were:

1. A seven-period day that would comply with the secondary teacher preparation provision.
2. Teachers not assigned to six classes would be assigned a supervisory period (i.e., study hall).
3. One class period would be increased by a maximum of 10 minutes for homeroom activities. The current Home Base Advisory class would be eliminated.

3. More instructional time will be available daily for each class.
4. Teachers will be teaching in their content areas.
5. Teachers will have fewer class preps.
6. Honors/advanced classes will be offered in English, continued in math, and may be considered in future years for science and social studies.
7. Traveling teachers will be reduced.

The district committee also recommended that three middle schools move to departmentalized scheduling, as a model program the following year. This model included elimination of the advisory program, elimination of the teaming structure and the interdisciplinary daily planning period, and introduction of advanced English and science classes.

When these recommendations were released, teachers began to choose the side of the debate that they supported. Some teachers in favor of teaming contacted board members and district office administrators to express their concern about the loss of teams. One teacher wrote an editorial about the benefits of teaming.

In October 2001, a forum was held at one of the middle schools, where the draft of the middle grades alternative scheduling project was handed out. The next

**The majority of new middle school principals hired in the district had backgrounds in high school, which may have contributed to a loss of building-level support for effective elements of middle school structure and philosophy.**

4. Honors/advanced designation would be given to math and English courses. This is currently in place for math, but would have to be developed for English. Initially, there would be no honors/advanced designations for science and social studies. These would be considered in the future.

The committee also listed advantages to moving to an alternative “middle school” schedule but did not list any disadvantages to changing to a departmentalized schedule.

The advantages that were listed were:

1. The seven-period day schedule will provide for 10 more minutes of personal planning for teachers daily (50 minutes more per week).
2. Class sizes will be smaller.

day an article ran in the local newspaper reporting that the proposed changes met opposition from parents and teachers. The newspaper article stated:

But many in the audience questioned why the district needed the change. Test scores are high and middle schools have been in place for 15 years. And the sense of community that students feel through their teams—groups of 100 to 125 students taught the core subjects by a group of three to five teachers—is as valuable as the coursework, several parents said. (*Kansas City Star*, October 16, 2001)

Another patron said, “Offering honors classes to some students would leave others, by default, in classes deemed as not rigorous.” Due to such criticism, the

alternative departmental scheduling program occurred in only one middle school the following school year (2002–2003). However, by midway through the 2002–2003 school year, the superintendent sent a letter to patrons in the district stating that *all other* middle schools would adopt the re-reform for the 2003–2004 academic year. By 2003–2004, there were also honors/advanced classes for math, English, and science in seventh and eighth grades.

The night that the report was made to the board of education, more supporters of middle level schools came to the meeting, although there were a few teachers who did not like teaming and spoke out against it. One director of middle level education in a neighboring district, who was also a patron of the district, spoke out in support of the middle school program. One of the teachers who had been in the district since the 1980s attended all of the district's "organizational meetings" to advocate for retention of the middle school philosophy and scheduling and reported,

I heard a lot of really disgruntled parents talking about things that weren't happening in their particular middle school. Some of them, at least,

### From teamwork back to isolation

The biggest change was the dissolution of the teaming concept. Instead of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies teachers engaging in a daily team planning period with students assigned to an interdisciplinary team of teachers, these team teachers now taught an additional section of their subject area and had a supervisory period. One long-tenured middle school teacher stated,

It was interesting to me that we were kicking and screaming about teaming in the first place, and when they wanted to take it away years later we were kicking and screaming to keep teaming in place. Everything is so cyclic. (E. C., personal communication, November 12, 2005)

With the change to departmentalized scheduling, the school names remained the same. A social studies teacher described the school name displayed on the bricks. "When you look at the building, you can see the faded outline of "Junior High" on the building. It says "Middle School" now, but it isn't really a middle school" (N. I., personal communication, November 9, 2005). The new random scheduling of students, rather than

**If you have a model that's not being implemented properly, it's hard to fight for it.**

had really legitimate concerns that these schools were being called middle schools, but they weren't. If you have a model that's not being implemented properly, it's hard to fight for it. I understood some parents felt really concerned, and some principals didn't have the courage to demand the best from teachers. But I knew it worked in our building, so we were hoping we could at least keep the model intact at our school. Of course, that didn't happen. (personal communication, October 15, 2001)

When the Middle School Program of Studies enrollment booklets with course offerings were sent home to parents in January of 2003, the superintendent also sent a letter to parents describing budgetary concerns in the Sunflower District. There was a need to make budget cuts totaling \$2.4 million, and the middle grades departmentalized scheduling reforms were included in a list of *budget cuts* that included reduced custodial staff and limitations on out-of-district travel.

assigning students to a team of teachers, enabled the district to offer advanced English and science courses for students who met certain academic criteria. A published study of this innovation found that even when the academic criteria for enrollment were suspended,

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly less likely to enroll in advanced coursework, even when open enrollment policies exist that enable all students to enter advanced courses without prerequisite criteria. (Friend & Degen, 2007, p. 246)

One teacher taught advanced English in the early 1980s junior high model, and had come full circle after 15 years of heterogeneous English classes in the middle school to teach advanced English again. She stated:

I feel teaming really was the best way to reach kids. I feel kids are much more on their own now, and

teachers are not given the time to collaborate to figure out the best ways to work for kids. I think interdisciplinary units make learning relevant for kids, and those are the things they remember, and we don't have that now. ... When I look back on what I used to do, and what I do now, I kind of feel sad. It's lovely that I get these really bright kids now, but I feel badly for the kids that are not getting this enrichment.

The student intervention team is working hard, but is not really able to help all kids. With counselors gone in the elementary schools, kids with needs come to us, and we can't help them. (M. T., personal communication, November 13, 2005)

### Impact of changes

Quantitative data were analyzed through a comparison of means to examine changes in achievement and discipline over a four-year period (two years prior to and after the 2003 change from the teaming to the departmental model) for each middle school and aggregated across the district, and to analyze achievement results disaggregated according to socioeconomic status (SES). Data sources included student demographics and enrollment statistics, annual disciplinary reports for each of the seven middle schools, and state assessment scores in reading and mathematics that were administered annually to both grade levels.

Every middle school demonstrated a slight increase in reading achievement for "all students" and for low SES students, and five of the seven middle schools demonstrated improved math achievement for these groups (see Figure 1). It was really not much of a surprise that these increases occurred, because the stratification of language arts and math courses encouraged a focus on targeted indicators on state assessments, and teachers were given specific test preparation curricular activities to teach on a weekly basis. In addition, this trend of annual increases in achievement for all middle grades students and low socioeconomic students was similar state-wide for reading, and averages for improvement were significantly higher state-wide for math during this same time period (KSDE, 2007).

The return to departmentalized scheduling, in addition to other district professional development and curricular revisions, coincided with these positive gains in academic test scores; however, the data related to meeting the affective needs of young adolescents demonstrated an opposite trend. Five of the seven middle schools demonstrated an increase in the

number of crimes committed during the school day, and, on average, the district showed an increase of three incidents per building of felonies or misdemeanors committed during the school day. Conflict among students, disrespect to staff members, possession of illegal substances, theft, and threats were common examples of these incidents.

While the district enrollment *declined* by 186 students during the time period, the average number of suspensions per building *increased* by 44. Six of the seven middle schools demonstrated an increase in the total number of suspensions and in the number of students suspended. One middle school suspended an average of 21.4% of enrolled students during the first two years of the departmentalized scheduling.

### Insider perspectives on change

As an administrator in one of the schools impacted by these changes, Jennifer saw firsthand how the departmentalized structure failed to meet the affective needs of students. When she and her colleagues had daily team meetings, the counselors and the administrators visited with teachers one day each week to discuss students and their academic and affective needs. They no longer had multiple daily structures to meet these needs, so problems were escalating until they had major situations to deal with when the problems did surface. This same observation was reflected among Jennifer's colleagues in the other middle schools in her conversations with them throughout the first year of departmentalized scheduling.

Other stakeholders noticed that things were different. During a site-based council meeting, an eighth grade student who had been on a team in seventh grade stated, "It's like the teachers don't even know you. You're

**Figure 1** Sunflower District and state average changes in percentage of students demonstrating proficiency on reading and math assessments (2002–2003 to 2004–2005)

	Reading All Students	Reading Low SES	Math All Students	Math Low SES
District Average	+6.87%	+13.05%	+2.75%	+4.2%
State Average	+7.6%	+10.75%	+9.05%	+12.75%



Team analysis and discussion of student performance data help ensure that the individual needs of each student are met.

photo by Alan Gelin

lucky if the teachers know your name, unless you're one of the kids that talks out all the time" (K. G., personal communication, November 15, 2005). This was not surprising, as the change from content area teachers having one advisory class per day to one additional subject area class meant that many of the core academic teachers now had student caseloads of 140 to 160 students each day.

A seventh grade student in the departmentalized middle school stated that he wished he was involved in more projects like the kind he experienced in sixth grade. When questioned further, it was evident he was talking about projects that involved using skills and knowledge from several, if not all, of the core curricular areas.

While remembering her experiences as part of a team of 110 students, one teacher said,

Bonding and relationships were applied to the broader community ... bringing the parents in ... students and teachers had a sense of community. Teachers had to feel more supported. Students were part of a team, and that meant something. (K. J., personal communication, November 7, 2005)

## Conclusion

The foundation of effective middle level schools is supported by three pillars: academic excellence, social equity, and developmental responsiveness (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The Sunflower District leaders chose to sacrifice social equity and developmental responsiveness on the altar of academic excellence. They tracked

students into advanced, average, and low-level classes to boost test scores, despite more than 50 years of research demonstrating that this kind of grouping perpetuates inequality by offering students in each of these tracks very different kinds of educational experiences (Rees, Brewer, & Argys, 2000; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Terwel, 2005). The district moved from interdisciplinary teams to a departmental organization, dismantling the small learning communities in which every student was known very well by at least one adult (Cassilius, 2006; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000; Supovitz & Christman, 2005). This new structure also eliminated the opportunity for teachers to work together on higher-level learning activities that integrate curricular areas.

District leaders decided to make these changes without systematically collecting data from key stakeholder groups, nor did they carefully consider research-supported best practices for middle level schools or preliminary data from the pilot school in the district that had returned to departmentalized scheduling. The perception among middle school administrators was that these district-level decisions were based on economic efficiency, not data or principles.

High-performing middle level schools effectively operate with a democratic system of governance that includes opportunities for collaboration and shared decision-making by all stakeholders, either directly or through representation, as recommended in *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pp. 23–24). The case of Sunflower School District demonstrates two different models for educational reform—a more inclusive and strategic process connected to the research on middle level education as demonstrated in the transformation from junior high schools to middle schools in the 1980s, and a more autocratic process driven by the district administration and school board in the recent change from the middle school philosophy and program to a departmentalized structure. Administrators and teachers engaged in the complex process of middle level reform must maintain a proper balance among academic excellence, social equity, and developmental responsiveness as they seek to provide every young adolescent equal access to a rigorous curriculum and a safe, supportive learning environment.

### Extensions

How effective is your school at supporting the academic and affective development of your students? In what ways can you work to strike a better balance between the two?

Assess the capacity of your school to sustain effective middle level programs and practices. Identify specific barriers or facilitating factors and discuss ways to address them.

### References

- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation.
- Cassilius, B. (2006). Using relationships, responsibility, and respect to get from "good to great" in Memphis middle schools. *Middle School Journal*, 37(5), 4–15.
- Erb, T. O. (2002). Education politics and middle level best practice: The clash continues. *Middle School Journal*, 33(4), 4.
- Erb, T. O. (2006). Middle school models are working in many grade configurations to boost student performance. *American Secondary Education*, 34(3), 4–13.
- Flowers, H., Mertens, S. B., & Mulhall, P. F. (1999). The impact of teaming: Five research-based outcomes. *Middle School Journal*, 31(2), 57–60.
- Flowers, H., Mertens, S. B., & Mulhall, P. F. (2000). What makes interdisciplinary teams effective? *Middle School Journal*, 31(4), 53–56.
- Friend, J., & Degen, E. (2007). Middle-level reform: The introduction of advanced English and science courses. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 18(2), 246–276.
- Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York & Westerville, OH: Teachers College Press & National Middle School Association.
- Kansas State Department of Education. (2007). Kansas Report Card. Retrieved November 5, 2007, from <http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=233>
- National Middle School Association. (1982). *This we believe*. Columbus, OH: Author.
- National Middle School Association. (2003). *This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.
- Rees, D. I., Brewer, D. J., & Argys, L. M. (2000). How should we measure the effect of ability grouping on student performance? *Economics of Education Review*, 19(1), 17–20.
- Rubin, B. C., & Noguera, P. A. (2004). Tracking detracking: Sorting through the dilemmas and possibilities of detracking in practice. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 37, 92–101.
- Slavin, R. E. (1989). PET and the pendulum: Faddism in education and how to stop it. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70(10), 52–58.
- Supovitz, J. A., & Christman, J. B. (2005). Small learning communities that actually learn: Lessons for school leaders. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86, 649–651.
- Terwel, J. (2005). Curriculum differentiation: Multiple perspectives and developments in education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(6), 653–670.

**Jennifer I. Friend** is an assistant professor in the Department of Urban Leadership & Policy Studies in Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. E-mail: [friendji@umkc.edu](mailto:friendji@umkc.edu)

**Sue C. Thompson** is an associate professor in the Department of Urban Leadership & Policy Studies in Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. E-mail: [thompsonsc@umkc.edu](mailto:thompsonsc@umkc.edu)

## Coming in September to Middle School Journal Readers

### Educating the Whole Child

- Critical thinking skills in social studies
- Social-emotional and cognitive development
- Gender identity

### Plus

- Poetry and English language learners
- Teaching about the U.S. census
- And much more!

*In your mailbox in early September!!*

