

The Junior High School: A Changing View

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SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION

In July of 1963 William Alexander, the chairman of the department of education at George Peabody College for Teachers, was asked to address the successes of the junior high movement in the United States. As luck would have it, his travels to the national conference at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, took him through LaGuardia Airport. Delayed for several hours at that airport, Prof. Alexander had some time to mull over his remarks intended for the conference on "Ends and Means in Junior High Education." The more he thought about what he intended to say, the more he came to believe that junior high schools needed some significant changes if they were to meet the needs of young adolescents. His original title, "The Dynamic Junior High School," would no longer do.

With time on his hands, he rewrote his now retitled address: "The Junior High School: A Changing View." He decided that four of the characteristics of junior high schools should continue. However, he identified three additional characteristics that he thought should be sought in a new middle school. What Prof. Alexander articulated in July 1963 has resonance today. Issues that we are currently debating—special classes vs. heterogeneous classes and inclusion, values and character education vs. sticking to the basics, general education vs. curriculum differentiation, core classes vs. exploratory experiences—were all addressed by Prof. Alexander in 1963.

This address is considered to be one of the foundational documents in middle school education. Yet finding copies of it had become almost impossible. When Prof. Kenneth McEwin was writing William Alexander's biography for the "Founder's Series" that appeared in Middle School Journal, he discovered that Dr. Alexander no longer could locate his own copy of that address. In May 1992, the same month that Alexander's biography appeared in the Journal, Gordon Vars sent his own annotated, typed copy of the address to Ken McEwin. A copy was extant!

*More than extant, as it turns out. A year ago when I was teaching a graduate course in curriculum planning a student brought to me a copy of Glen Hass and Kimball Wiles, *Readings in Curriculum* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1965). In that book was a copy of "The junior High School: A Changing View." Believing that "We can chart our future clearly and wisely only when we know the path which has led to the present" (Adlai Stevenson, 1952), I am pleased to reprint in Middle School Journal William Alexander's vision of a new middle school.*

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At the time this article was originally published, William M. Alexander was the chairman of the Department of Education at George Peabody College for teachers, Nashville, Tennessee. Prof. Alexander is currently Professor Emeritus at the University of Florida, Gainesville. For more information about Prof. Alexander, "Father of the American Middle School," readers are referred to his biography that appeared in the May 1992 issue of *Middle School Journal*.



It is my task to attempt to “identify the features of the junior high school that seem to be undergoing change and those which seem to endure.” I shall start out with a review of four characteristics of the junior high school which have been somewhat continuously sought and, to varying degrees, attained. Of these characteristics, I would also ask: Should they continue, and why or why not? Then I shall describe three other characteristics which many of us seek in the middle school of the future, and close my presentation with some hypotheses as to a partial, tentative model of this new middle school we need.

Characteristics of the junior high school which continue

From its beginnings, the junior high school has sought to be a transitional or bridge institution between the elementary and the high school. This characteristic has been vigorously questioned both as to its appropriateness and its actual development.

As to appropriateness, certainly there is need to ease the transition of learners from childhood to adolescence. This type of transition function is more relevant to my second characteristic, however. Also, as long as the program and organization of the elementary schools differed sharply, there was, and is, real need for a bridge between the self-contained classroom of the elementary school with its broad and flexible units of work and the departmentalized program of the high school with its relatively greater emphasis on subjects and specialization. These differences are becoming much less sharp, however, as subjects are once again being pushed downward, as departmentalization of various sorts is again spreading in the elementary grades, and as vertical curriculum planning in the major subjects makes more progress. That is, there are the distinct signs, commented on in Professor Broudy’s paper and elsewhere, that the differences between the last years of the elementary school and the first ones of the high school—junior, senior, 4-year, or 6-year—are not nearly so severe and distinct as a decade ago, or indeed as many feel they should be.

However needed a transition is between the elementary and the high school, there are grave doubts as to the functioning of the junior high school in this regard. It is an interesting commentary on this function of the entire junior high school that after these schools had been widely established, a return from their departmentalized organization a la high school was sought in the block-time or core program. The chief justification of this program is to ease the transition from elementary to junior high school—a clear admission that the usually departmentalized program and organization of the junior high school tended to defeat the transitional function. Other evidence abounds that the “junior” high school has typically been a secondary school following the 4-year high school model rather than being an in-between school bridging a gap between elementary and secondary education. As Professor Johnson pointed out in his *Saturday Review* article, the transition that was originally of greatest concern was that of making “the academic initiation at grade nine easier for pupils” rather than the transition from grade six to seven or the one represented by pubescence. The general adoption by junior high schools of the schedule, the activity program, and the organization of the high school attests to the dominance of the idea that the bridge was fundamentally a vestibule added at the front door of the high school.



Thus, there is a major question as to whether the junior high school as it now exists should defend its existence on the transitional basis. Indeed we doubt whether any institution can have real purpose and vitality if its role is subordinated either to the separate institutions it bridges or the one for which it serves a preparatory function. I would vote for elimination of the separateness of current elementary, junior, and senior high schools, with the resulting need for bridges, and for instead a 12- to 14-year institution, with three levels in its vertical structure, each of which has a program and organization appropriate to its place in a sequential educational pattern. Thus, there would be a lower, middle, and upper level, or a primary, middle, and high school.

The second continuing characteristic of the junior high school is its composite of efforts to have a program of its own especially adopted [*sic*] to the needs of preadolescent and early adolescent pupils. All of us would undoubtedly like to see these efforts succeed in leading children successfully through pubescence and from the dependency of childhood to a resourceful, responsible independence of the adolescent. The catch here lies in the great variations between the sexes and among individuals in each, as so clearly pointed out in Professor Wattenberg's paper, as to when these changes occur. Apparently, if we would really have one school to bridge the gap from childhood to adolescence for all pupils, even nearly all pupils, it would have to enroll pupils from ages 10 through 16, or grades 5 through 10. Perhaps we shall have to settle instead for a school which serves a vestibule function for pubescence and adolescence for many, perhaps most, children, rather than for high school.

Despite the criticisms already made here and elsewhere, we should affirm the belief that the junior high school, even as a "junior" institution, has provided for some needs of the preadolescent, certainly better than in the narrower program of the 8-grade elementary school or of the more regimented one of the high school. In good junior high schools, boys and girls have had more of the freedom of movement they need, more appropriate health and physical education, more chances to participate in planning and managing their own activities, more resources for help on their problems of growing up, and more opportunities to explore new interests and to develop new aspirations. All of these features we would definitely continue in the middle school of the future.

A third continuing characteristic of the junior high school has been its program of exploratory experiences. Once a prevocational education function, exploration has been broadened to include a wider variety of possible interests. There seems little disagreement that the youngster of twelve and above needs many and varied opportunities to identify and/or deepen worthwhile interests, and all of us would applaud what junior high schools have done to this end. However, the recent pressures on schools to give greater emphasis to the academic subjects may be curtailing the exploratory feature. Earlier languages, more mathematics and science, more homework, may mean for many pupils less time and energy for the fine arts, for homemaking and industrial arts, and for such special interests as dramatics, journalism, musical performance, scouting, camping, outside jobs, and general reading.



Furthermore, many view the 6-, 9-, 12-, or even 18-weeks elective courses in grades 8 and 9 as inadequate exploration. In some areas these may be the only possibilities, but we wonder if different scheduling and a different relationship of subjects and activities might facilitate many independent experiences and projects developing either from the classroom, the counseling situation, the activity program, or just from the pupil's expressed interest? Could the middle school give more emphasis to independent study and activity as an aid to the transition from childhood to adolescence? Perhaps we need more special interest centers competently supervised and operated on a flexible time basis in which children can get guidance and experience in such varied activities as reading, acting, writing, painting, ceramics, mechanics of the automobile and home, typing, photography, and personal grooming and many others.

The fourth characteristic of the junior high school is one all support—continued general education. Probably most of us would heartily agree with our hosts here at Cornell that there is great need to underline the intellectual growth phase of this program. Certainly curriculum planning at the junior high school level has been no more successful than elsewhere, perhaps less so, in defining the scope and sequence of an adequate general education. Possibly the difficulty has lain in part in the feeling that the subjects in “junior” high school must be very different from the elementary school, although repetition has continued. My own view is that the junior high school break has unwittingly hastened the disrespect for intellectual activity too common among adolescents. Has the “junior” high school with its imitation of the high school activity and social programs, hastened and fixed more firmly the ideals of athletic prowess (boys) and popularity (girls) over academic brilliance as reported in Coleman's study of *The Adolescent Society*?

Continued general education in the junior high school must indeed give a new emphasis to intellectual development. This it must do, I believe, by more skillful teaching and more careful curriculum planning, rather than by more, or even continued pressures on grades, and preparation for high school and college.

Other characteristics to be sought in the middle school

Several factors point to the need for a vigorous attempt in the middle school to focus on the individualization of instruction. Although the primary school certainly pays attention to individual differences, its program is most of all one of integration of young children into accepted patterns of communication and social behavior. Habits of conformity are well-enough developed in most 10- to 12-year-olds to indicate a need for opening up opportunities for individual deviations of a wholesome and promising variety.

I was impressed by Dr. Paul Torrance's report recently of studies in youngsters' creative behavior that showed a decided slump for many children beginning about the fourth grade. Is our emphasis on the group and on conformity in the middle grades contributing to the inhibition of creative ideas and activities?



We are all familiar, too, with the characteristic resistance to schools and schooling which begins to be expressed even in the third and fourth grades. Whether real or fancied, the apparent disposition of many children to discount educational purposes and programs reflects inadequate motivation to intellectual achievement. It is at this level too, that underachievement is first readily identified. The potential drop-out is noted, and the need for individual help and stimulation weighs heavily on the conscientious, sympathetic teacher.

Ability grouping and programs for special groups may be only hiding the needs of the individual in the group. Whether he be the potential artist or drop-out, the intellectually stimulated or unmotivated, Johnny needs all the attention he can get from a teacher who knows him well and respects his individuality.

To help in individualization, the middle school needs to provide adequate diagnostic and guidance services. It also needs to permit teachers to work individually with children and their parents. All of the other known aids to individualization—for example, a variety of learning resources, time and place for independent study, self-evaluation devices, individual projects, opportunities for varied pupil roles in classroom and school organizations—should be abundant in the middle school years.

A related second characteristic to be sought in the middle school of the future is a flexible curriculum, permitting and indeed aiding pupils to progress at different rates and to different depths. Although the requirements of continued general education make mandatory some beginning points and goals in the basic curriculum fields, minimum grade standards subject by subject can defeat the aims of intellectual development. Programmed instructional materials in mathematics and language arts may help to pace individual's learning progress. Unit-of-work approaches in social studies and science can provide differentiated tasks for learners. In matters of performance, individuals can be challenged to seek their own level of attainment in playing an instrument, using paints and easels, or hitting a softball.

But even greater flexibility must come through a reconsideration of classroom organization and procedure. The middle grades seem none too early to initiate some pupils into plans of curriculum differentiation which provide for certain ones to work on reading improvement in a reading center, while some classmates are reading in the classroom under their teacher's guidance and still others are using the library for more challenging materials. Or a few pupils may be working with a speech teacher, others preparing a dramatic presentation, and others in the language laboratory learning a modern foreign language.

In all studies continued attention would be given to the learning process itself. The teacher demonstrates how sources are used to get answers to real questions, and pupils apply the procedures to questions they investigate. Reference books, textbooks, interviews, current newspaper and magazines, and other sources are fully utilized as methods of inquiry; they replace methods of memorization as the focal points of teaching and learning. Although facts are kept central, fact-finding rather than fact-memorizing and reciting is emphasized in the flexible curriculum of essential learning processes instead of minimum essentials of definitions, dates, and details in general. The curriculum which should be characteristic of the middle school must reflect such an educational belief as was stated by the Winnetka Public Schools as their No. 1 objective



in a recent publication of Beliefs and Objectives, under the heading of “Give Primary and Unremitting Devotion to Intellectual Growth.” The statement in part is as follows:

Intellectual growth means much more than an increasing competence in the academic content of the curriculum. We must endeavor to stimulate in the child a love for learning, an attitude of inquiry, a passion for truth and beauty, a questioning mind. The learning of right answers is not enough ... beyond answers alone, we must help children ask right questions, and discover their answers through creative thinking, reasoning, judging, and understanding. We must help children know that learning is its own reward, uncluttered by momentary symbolic rewards for accomplishments or penalties for failures.

Learning can best flourish when teachers, supported by adequate materials, create a climate in which children are genuinely desirous of learning. It will flourish when children become, through the teacher’s stimulation, self-motivated, knowing that learning is necessary and important, and why they are engaged upon it. And it behooves us to be sure that it is necessary and important. Conclusions, values, solutions to problems are not taught ... they are learned, created, possessed internally by the child, having been excited by the teacher, and having been led by the teacher to the place where the answers might be found.

A final, and somewhat summarizing, characteristic to be sought in the middle school is an emphasis on values. In the upper or high school boys and girls are beset by conflicts in value systems. In the early school years, these conflicts were less real or absent. Between the primary and later years is a real opportunity for the school to provide leadership in fixing values which will survive the perils ahead. As boys and girls are challenged in the middle grades to assume responsibility for their own actions, to respect each other and the adults with whom they associate, and to distinguish right from wrong, truth from falsehood, they can grow to a real independence.

Every class, every pupil-teacher conversation, every school activity is a setting for the development of values. The responsiveness of the older children and preadolescent makes the middle grades an especially desirable level for a continuing emphasis on this aspect of education.

A tentative model for the new middle school

The “changing view” I have seen and reflected here is by now obvious to you as a view of a middle unit in a vertically planned educational system. This unit or school may comprise what is now called the junior high school; however, this unit is really a third quarter, too much like the final quarter. Perhaps it will be the grade 6-8 unit, now growing in popularity. I would personally prefer to see it as near a middle unit as possible, namely, what now constitutes grades 5-8.

Experimentation with a new middle school (best developed in new building programs, although it could be accomplished by modifying present junior high school structures), should serve several purposes, it is suggested:

1. It would give this unit a status of its own, rather than a “junior” classification.
2. It would facilitate the introduction in grades 5 and 6 of some specialization and team teaching in staffing patterns.
3. It would also facilitate the reorganization of teacher education sorely needed to provide teachers competent for the middle school; since existing patterns of neither elementary nor secondary teacher training would suffice, a new pattern would have to be developed.



4. A clearly defined middle unit should more easily have the other characteristics already described as desirable, than the typical junior high school: (1) a well-articulated 12- to 14-year system of education; (2) preparation for, even transition to, adolescence; (3) continued general education; and (4) abundant opportunities for exploration of interests, individualization of instruction, a flexible curriculum, and emphasis on values.

I hope that the suggestions made here do not amount to the “major surgery” Dr. Johnson mentioned in his *Saturday Review* article as being often prescribed by critics; he stated that these proposals generally had “about as much chance of being pulled off as has the abolition of the income tax.” I hope the specifics of this tentative model now proposed may get some further consideration and tried out as applicable, perhaps in a few complete experimental units.

I. The program might have these phases:

- A. Learning skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, computation skills continued from the elementary school, with new emphases on use of library tools and self-teaching devices.
- B. Other common learnings: literature, social studies, languages, mathematics, science, and fine arts, following a sequence of instruction in these areas planned for grades K-12.
- C. Personal development: health and physical education geared to the 10- to 14-year-old; individually planned experiences in foreign languages, typing, fine and practical arts, and remedial basic skills; other exploratory experiences through independent study and a program of special interest activities and student-managed enterprises; close relationship with a counselor-teacher throughout the middle school; and adequate diagnostic tests, parent conferences, and other data sources for counseling.

II. The organization of the middle school might include these arrangements:

- A. A team of three to five teachers (one or two especially competent in language arts and social studies, one or two in science and mathematics, and one in fine arts and/or languages) could be assigned to each group of 75 to 150 pupils, organized either on a single-grade or multi-grade basis. These teachers would be responsible for about two-thirds of the instruction of these pupils, on a team basis according to such plans as are appropriate to curriculum goals, teacher competencies, and school organization.
- B. Each pupil would be a member of a small homeroom group, which would be assigned to one of the team members for counseling and individual scheduling for special programs.
- C. Each pupil would participate daily in a program of health and physical education directed by a specialist in this area.
- D. Such special instructional and/or laboratory centers as the following would be available for several purposes, with each center manned by a teacher competent in individualized instruction: reading; writing; speech; mathematics; library; foreign languages; typing; music; art; industrial arts; home economics; dramatics. Pupils would be scheduled for work in these centers on an individualized basis for both short-term and long-term instruction as needed.
- E. The basic instructional units (75 to 150 pupils) and the homeroom groups (3 to 5 in each unit) would be organized on a heterogeneous basis as to ability. The teaching team might arrange some instruction in basic skills by groups determined for this purpose according to status in the skills concerned.



III. Personnel arrangements might include:

- A. A principal whose major duties involve the coordination of basic instructional units and special instructional centers, and leadership in curriculum planning and evaluation activities.
- B. An assistant principal (assuming 500 or more pupils) to manage supporting administrative and auxiliary school services and to supervise record-keeping, clerical, and fiscal operations.
- C. Special staff positions: curriculum research and evaluation, psychological services, health services, etc.
- D. Classification of teachers as either (1) homeroom or (2) special center, there being no differential in status or salary due to this classification.
- E. Homeroom teachers would work with pupils about two-thirds of their scheduled time and have one-third available for team planning, individual preparation, and parent conferences. Special center teachers would have an appropriate period available daily for individual preparation and conferences with teaching team members.
- F. Employment and assignment of faculty based on:
 - 1. Five to six years' college training and three or more years' successful teaching experience before permanent license.
 - 2. For all teachers a major in their teaching field(s) through the Master's degree, with adequate professional education of a practice-oriented nature.
 - 3. Equivalent of a doctorate in the field of specialization for all administrative and special staff positions.
 - 4. Salary schedule provisions for recognition of superior training and performance.

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