

Philadelphia Study

We conclude that while K-8 schools did perform better in terms of student achievement, the advantage exists for several reasons and may not be easily replicated or represent a solution to the problem of low achieving schools...

Assessing the Benefits of K-8 Schools
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One of the most common requests recently from principals, teachers, parents, and policymakers is for research that will help determine what grade configuration is best for students in various grade levels. Is it more appropriate for fifth- or sixth-graders to be in a middle school or elementary school? Are there academic and developmentally appropriate benefits to a K–8 grade configuration versus an elementary school and middle school configuration?

NWREL looked at the available research on grade configuration and concluded that little evidence existed to determine a cause-and-effect relationship between grade configuration and academic achievement. The few studies that did exist offered few clear policy guidelines. For example, one controlled study showed that sixth-graders did better in a K–8 setting rather than a middle school setting, but it didn't demonstrate how the configuration affects other students of different grade levels (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Many studies also did not control for school size, socioeconomic factors, and other variables, so results could be attributed to reasons other than grade configurations.

Not much has changed during the last decade in terms of the limited amount of rigorous research, although a few more studies have been conducted. Still, no empirical, large-scale studies have examined the relationship between grade configuration and student achievement as measured by standardized test scores (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2005).

Of the studies that exist, only a few have statistically controlled variables: Most are case or correlational studies and rely on data self-reported by school districts. Few have looked at the relationship between grade configuration and student outcomes. However, several recent research reviews have done a good job of summarizing existing research and offer suggestive rather than conclusive findings.

The results of several studies indicated that middle level grades 6, 7, and 8 obtained higher achievement in K–8 schools than in schools with middle school configurations. Abella (2005) noted in her study of Miami-Dade County schools that K–8 students had significant short-term beneficial effects on achievement, attendance, and suspension rates. **She also observed that sixth and seventh grades showed greater improvement in mathematics and reading compared to the same grades in middle schools, but the two groups had identical scores in ninth grade, so the effects were not long term.** Abella cautions that further research should be done to determine if these effects remained true when taking into account factors such as greater numbers of students, lower performing schools, and K–8 schools operating for longer periods of time.

Offenberg (2001) determined that eighth-graders showed higher achievement in K–8 schools than in middle schools. However, he acknowledged that **a contributing factor in the higher achievement might be the lesser number of eighth-grade students in the K–8 schools compared with those in middle schools.**

Hough (2004) makes a distinction between the effectiveness of K–8 ‘elemiddle’ schools that adhere to middle school philosophy and programs, and K–8 schools that don’t. His research suggests that when “K–8 “elemiddle” schools are found to be outperforming 5–8 and 6–8 schools, it is because the former are more fully implementing middle grades promising practices... ” (p. 4). However, he admits that no studies have been conducted with a large enough sample size to compare middle schools fully implementing the middle school philosophy to K–8 schools. **Consequently, generalizations should not be made.**

Alspaugh (1998) studied 16 school districts and found that students who attended middle schools experienced greater achievement loss in the transition to high school than students making the transition from a K–8 school. “The findings imply that students placed in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time experience more desirable outcomes” (Alspaugh, 1998, p. 25). The schools studied were primarily in rural and small-town districts, with no schools in urban areas. **Alspaugh’s previous studies indicated that students typically gain back any achievement loss the year after the transition to a new school.**

Results of the studies should be interpreted with caution as they are very few in number, can’t necessarily be generalized across schools, and don’t control for all possible variables. Researchers urge practitioners to study strengths and weaknesses of various configurations to create effective educational services. “Rather than debate which grade configuration is best for middle grades, we would be better off expending our energy creating a curriculum that intellectually engages and inspires young adolescents, pushing for organized structures that support high-quality relationships, and finding better ways to reach out to families and communities” (Beane & Lipka, 2006, p. 30). **In a recent research review, Anfara and Buehler (2005) note that “no sequence of grades is perfect or, in itself, guarantees student academic achievement and healthy social and emotional development” (p. 57). No particular grade configuration is the “magic bullet” to improving student achievement.**

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