

## **Middle School Model: Instructional Delivery for Adolescents, Ages 10-15**

Moorhead School District #152  
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### **Background**

In February 2001, an organizational analysis was presented to Dr. Larry Nybladh, Superintendent of Schools, and to the School Board of Moorhead Area Public Schools. As a response to this analysis, the Superintendent developed a recommendation for a decision making process involving eight Primary Focus Areas. To further break down the process, three approaches were identified to address the Focus Areas. These recommended approaches are: 1) Administrative Project, 2) Research Study Group, and 3) Community Task Force. For Focus Area Four, Middle School Model, the Research Study Group approach and the Community Task Force approach were utilized. The Middle School Model Community Task Force members were selected based on the perspective they represent and/or the expertise that they would lend to the process.

In the Organizational Analysis Study, the consultant “found it unusual that a school district of the size and quality of Moorhead School District #152 did not have in place (operationally) a modern-day middle school facility, philosophy, and programs and services.” Thus the Research Study Group was asked to research the middle school

model for instructional delivery, taking into consideration the resources necessary for and consequences of the implementation of this model within Moorhead Public Schools. The Community Task Force was asked to consider the report made by the Research Study Group and make recommendations to the Superintendent and the Facility and Grade Level Configuration Model Community Task Force. Members of the Research Study Group, Dr. Betty Myers, Colleen Tupper, Lynne Kovash and Janel Simonson, made presentations to the Task Force. Additionally, reading materials and informational pamphlets that had been gathered by the Research Study Group were provided to better assist the Task Force in completing its report. These materials included the report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and a follow-up publication, *Turning Points 2000*, which together comprise the foundation of middle school reform.

### **Summary of Findings and Discussions**

Our research, and that of the Research Study Group, confirms the findings of the Organizational Analysis Study, that Moorhead does not currently have in place a modern-day middle school facility, philosophy, and programs and services. Moorhead instead leans toward a “traditional” junior high school method of instructional delivery to students in the middle school age group, which is defined as ages 10-15. Research clearly indicates that the junior high model is not in line with established best practices for educating young adolescents.

The primary agenda of middle school education is to promote young adolescents' intellectual development (*Turning Points 2000*, page 10). However, as abundant research and experience indicate, successful fulfillment of this agenda is complicated by the fact that young adolescents of middle school age are very different than students who are immediately older or younger. Middle level students typically experience many personal challenges, including physical transitions associated with puberty, powerful social needs to find personal validation and support in peer groups, and a broad assortment of emotional vulnerabilities and insecurities. An important advantage of the middle school approach lies in its institutionalized and systematic attention to the fact that students' minds cannot be effectively reached and developed if their social and emotional needs are neglected or unmet. To this end, the middle school model fosters the creation of an atmosphere or culture that addresses the needs of the whole student, with special attention to the unique intellectual and emotional needs of this age group. For this reason, as compared to a junior high model, the middle school approach appears to provide a clearly superior cultural framework and educational environment for early adolescents.

With respect to curricular and pedagogical issues as well, the middle school model appears clearly superior to the junior high model. The junior high model, familiar to many of us from our own school days, is organized essentially as a high school. Class schedules are rigidly structured into 45-50 minute segments. Classes are subject based and typically presided over by a single teacher. Excellent teachers notwithstanding, the very structure of the junior high model encourages classes that consist of presentations of memorized facts that are disconnected from the ideas and contexts that make them

meaningful and fascinating to young minds. The junior high structure seldom allows for interdisciplinary connections. It is this interdisciplinary curriculum that endows the middle school model with its greatest educational promise. Middle school education is organized around teams of teachers from disparate subject areas providing instruction on a common set of issues or ideas. The team of teachers instructs a common set of students, making possible small communities of learners which enhance personal connections between students and teachers. The context and interdisciplinary relevance of ideas is emphasized, encouraging students to draw broader connections, think analytically rather than merely memorize, and engage their personal creativity as a resource in the educational process. Flexible scheduling enables teaching teams to cover topics at whatever speed is appropriate for their students. With respect to its potential to deliver quality education, develop young thinkers, and encourage a lasting love of learning, the middle school model appears clearly superior to the junior high approach.

Based on its research and attendance at Teaching The Transescent Seminar XXI, the Research Study Group provided a draft that outlined a blueprint of a middle school model. Upon review of this draft, the Task Force found it to be a solid beginning to implementing the middle school model in Moorhead Schools. The Research Study Group's report and supporting documentation is available in the Office of Teaching and Learning at the district office. We accept the findings of the Research Study Group that the middle school model is a superior delivery system for middle school aged children. Therefore, the Middle School Model Community Task Force recommends the implementation of the model.

Further, we agree with the recommendation that a middle school facility should house the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades as recommended by the Organizational Analysis Study, and supported by the Research Study Group. Exemplary middle schools develop programs and practices around the needs of young adolescents (Carnegie Corporation, 1989; National Middle School Association, 1997; National Middle School Association, 1995). Because the onset of puberty has occurred three months earlier per decade over the last century, sixth graders are physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively more mature today than ever before.

The middle school program is equipped to address the needs of sixth grade students in terms of curriculum, program, and instructional or professional expertise with young adolescents. Additionally, the inclusion of the sixth grade in the middle school is supported by the curriculum configuration of the Minnesota Graduation Standards. Sixth, seventh and eighth grade students are grouped together in assessment standards established by the Department of Children, Families and Learning. This configuration will also better facilitate communication of the curriculum across these grade levels.

Research indicates a positive correlation between student achievement and the degree to which the middle school model is implemented: the more complete the implementation, the better the result. With this in mind, we recognize that the district will face significant implementation issues should it embrace the middle school model. We identify several issues that we feel merit special attention:

- It will be necessary within the district to maintain class sizes that do not exceed 25 students, a limit that is well supported by middle school research. Sufficient resources will need to be secured to assure this limit.
- Common team planning time for teachers in the core subject areas is vital for effective implementation. This additional time is necessary to chart an interdisciplinary curriculum and to discuss specific student concerns.
- Implementation will require considerable staff development and will generate additional staffing needs, which may include school counselors and health professionals. “Increasing middle grades teachers’ knowledge and skills before and during their tenure in the classroom is critical to the success of middle grades education” (*Turning Points 2000*, page 94).
- Special care must be taken to preserve the excellence that already exists at the elementary grade levels, which may be affected by reconfiguration, increased class size, shifting resources, or other unforeseen effects.
- The implementation of the middle school model must carry with it the assurance that needs of the gifted and talented are met. Some literature suggests that several implementations of the middle school concept have not provided for the rigorous academic expectations needed by high-level learners. We must attempt to reach and educate every child, but we must also recognize that not every student learns as much, as well, or at the same rate as others. Specifically, high-level learners must be encouraged in all possible ways to continue learning at the pace and depth that matches their abilities. Therefore, we strongly recommend that the

district's middle school approach must include some programs, frameworks, or special curricula to meet the needs of gifted students.

- Special care must be taken to preserve the excellence that already exists in supporting the needs of those students receiving support services.
- Finally, it was the consensus of the Research Study Group and the Task Force that current facilities would not adequately provide for full implementation of the middle school model. To implement a middle school model for grades six through eight, all students need to be housed in one building. The space provided in that building should provide for the instructional teacher planning and resource needs as specified in middle school literature. Whether this space requires new construction or the remodeling of an existing facility is the district's decision. We feel it is clearly in the best interest of the community, students, and district to pursue full implementation of a middle school model provided it is further refined to a Moorhead specific plan, with resolution of implementation issues in such a plan.

Administrators within the district will confront these concerns as “management” issues, but it is the consensus of the Task Force that they must be both confronted and solved if the middle school model is to be effectively and successfully implemented. Assuming these implementation issues are solved, we feel it is clearly in the best interest of the community, students, and district to pursue full implementation of a middle school model.

## **Community Involvement**

A key to the success of organizational change is acceptance by community and various stakeholders. The conversion from a junior high model to a middle school model is no exception. “Large numbers of parents, patrons, and staff expressed a desire to see the school district implement a ‘true middle school’ concept” (Organizational Analysis, Dr. Roger Worner). It is the belief of the Task Force that the evidence supporting the middle school model is overwhelming and that acceptance of the delivery system will not be an issue in and of itself. The delivery system model needs to be communicated to achieve the goal of involving the larger community in understanding the model.

An informational drive should be implemented to create an open and trusting environment between the district and its stakeholders. Documents should be developed for public distribution. Communications may include pamphlets sent home with students, information distributed to local media, and presentations to area civic groups, PTACs, and business leaders to highlight the changes being proposed and the merits of making such changes. It would be our recommendation to keep to the basics of the middle school model, emphasizing the benefits to our students first and foremost. Information related to facilities and economic impact should be addressed at a later time. The focus in all communications with the community must be on the importance of quality education at this critical time in the educational process and that the middle school model is clearly the best way of delivering it.



## **Review of Conclusions**

The middle school model for instructional delivery is widely supported as the best means of educating adolescents in grades 6-8. It is the recommendation of this Task Force that the district fully implement this model for instructional delivery. Full implementation is the preferable alternative to any hybrid, although the district must develop a more comprehensive plan specific to Moorhead's situation than currently exists, addressing implementation issues regarding facilities, staff development, ability grouping, and budgetary restraints.

It is the recommendation of this Task Force to the Facility and Grade Level Configuration Model Community Task Force that the district fully implement the middle school philosophy and provide a facility specifically designed to meet the needs of students in grades 6-8.

## **Bibliography**

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: The Carnegie Corporation.

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