



"It's all about learning!"

# SCHOOL GRADE CONFIGURATION: WHAT'S BEST FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS?

*A Position Paper*

*of the*

*New England League of Middle Schools*

In schools and communities, the conversation continues regarding the question, "What grade configurations are best for effective young adolescent learning?" Some believe that a K-8 configuration is best to meet the young adolescent learning needs. Some have the opinion that a middle level school is identified by an educational program that houses students in grades 6-8, or 5-8, while others think that a middle school is a contemporary name for a junior high school.

NELMS believes that what a middle level school is called or how the grades are configured is not as important as the programs, practices, and relationships found within the grades that house young adolescents. Often overlooked in the discussion is how many middle level "best practices" are fully implemented, therefore those that perceive that the middle level is ineffective think that the problem rests solely with the grade configuration. "The middle level school movement cannot be faulted for educational deficiencies it did not create and practices it did not recommend". (Swaim, (2004), *Education Week*, p.35)

NELMS undeniably believes and states that middle level schools **do** work when programming is systematically and fully implemented. Student achievement increases proportionately to the number of middle level "best practices" used within a school (Felner, 1997).

The education of young adolescents, no matter how housed, must implement essential and effective strategies to best meet the unique needs of this rapidly developing age group. Based on middle level research, specifically *Turning Points 2000*, a true middle level program is identified by the "best practices" contained within it. These elements according to the authors Jackson and Davis are as follows:

- True middle level schools are divided into smaller communities for learning
- A core of common knowledge grounded in robust standards is at the center of middle level schools
- Middle level schools implement interdisciplinary teams that develop and facilitate meaningful learning opportunities
- Success for all students is the philosophy of well organized middle level schools
- Teachers and principals have the major responsibility to make decisions about their student's learning
- Good health development and academic strength run parallel to ensure all students are supported
- Families are allied with school staff through mutual respect, trust, and communication
- Schools and communities are partners in educating youth

There are many ways a community may configure a school. For example, in Vermont there are twenty-one different configurations used to educate seventh grade young adolescents. However, no matter how a community configures schools, there must be an assurance that "middle level best practices" are systematically and fully implemented. This ensures that educators can and will meet the needs of all middle level learners. Currently research informs community members, parents, educators, and students that they are much more likely to find these "best practices" in a 5-8 or 6-8 school configuration.

NELMS believes that what is best for young adolescent learners is a true middle level program that is not identified by grade configuration or location in the K-12 spectrum, but rather by what “best practices” are used to help young adolescents be successful in all classrooms!

**Sources:**

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(Sue Swaim, Executive Director of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), suggests that “the framework for effective middle schools is delineated in, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, the 2003 edition of the NMSA’s position paper, and *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis’ update of the Carnegie Corporation’s landmark report on middle-grades education”. (Swaim, 2004))