

Emerging adolescents – a school structure to suit their needs.

Closing Middle Schools in Northumberland, a progressive or regressive step?

Is there a significant educational difference between the two-tier and three-tier education system?

Not according Tony Blair.

‘We accept that both 2-tier and 3 tier can be effective.’
The Journal 11th February 2005

I believe Northumberland County Council has not produced enough evidence to back their claim for a proposed change from a three-tier to a two-tier system. This response will show that Northumberland County Council should do more research and produce a solid educational argument for such a huge re-organisation that could have a great detrimental effect on the children of Northumberland.
Catherine Clark (parent) March 2005

Northumberland County has used the argument that one transfer is better than two.

Below is a question from a parent:

‘Specifically – where is the evidence that one transfer is preferable to two, & similarly, where is the evidence that accountability for KS relates to improved attainment?’

Northumberland County Council’s answer: It stands to reason that the problem of dip in performance following transfer is exacerbated in situations where pupils have two transfers rather than one during their school career: Research by Homerton College(2) and the NFER(3) found that 40% of pupils lose motivation and make no progress in the year after transfer. The situation is very similar throughout the UK. ‘

Research data has shown a ‘dip’ in pupil’s progress when they transfer school. It happens in both two and three-tier systems. This ‘progress dip’ is recognised as a global problem. However The Homerton Report and NFER (Bridging the Gap) cannot be used as an argument against transfers at 9 and 13. The facts of the research concentrate on the single transfer at 11 from primary to secondary school.

Their answer then continues:

‘A similar dip occurs as children transfer from infants to juniors, with children transferring to middle schools at the end of Year 4 showing the biggest loss, with one in eight children showing a major drop in test scores. ‘

This research comes directly from a 'Transfer in the classroom-20 years on' (Hargeaves,L, Maurice,G).

It states that: ' For pupils transferring from year 4 to year 5 the results should be treated with caution as different forms of the same test were used on the two occasions.'(4)

This is insufficient evidence to suggest a larger problem with transferring twice. Research from Suffolk County (5) and York University (6) conclude there is no significant academic difference within the two or three-system system.

However educationalists worldwide have highlighted the single transfer at 11 as the root cause of disaffection, alienation, emotional and behavioural difficulties and disengagement from productive learning.

The Homerton Report found 11 year olds showed little enjoyment in their new school and by the end of that first year enthusiasm and motivation has seriously declined. The problem carries into year 8 that finds the pupils becoming bored and disaffected.

The large change in school environment, teaching styles and curriculum from primary to secondary can be daunting and traumatic for students.

Boys are particularly at risk. Professor Michael Barber (7) called them the 'lost boys who failed to read and write well by 11 and never recover educationally.' when they enter a large secondary school. According to a Dfes (8) report boys ages 13-14 (80%) were the main offenders of pupils excluded 2003/4. Truancy has also risen in secondary schools despite the government spending £16M on anti-truancy initiatives.(9)

Bad-behaviour is growing in secondary schools. 'Pupils behaviour is the second most important reason for secondary teachers leaving their schools.' TES March 2005

As well as the school environment, the gap in teaching styles between primary and secondary is a large jump for most pupils. David Bell, the schools chief inspector for ofsted has 'urged schools to do more to help pupils prepare for the different methods used at secondary level'.(10)

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (11) have concerns about children's education suffering due to schools desperate to climb the league tables. The 'narrowing' of the year 6 curriculum in primary schools has 'attracted the most powerful commentaries'. The QCA say that pupils will be disadvantaged if they arrive in secondary schools having not spent sufficient time on the full range of subjects.

' Mr Bell warned that discontinuity between primary and secondary school risked pushing children at risk of being excluded over the edge.'

Studies have raised concerns of the health and welfare of all students.

A paper published by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) a think tank. It states that schools who focus too heavily on getting children through exams (cramming) risk damaging children's emotional health. It points to the apparent rise in eating disorders, burn out, male disaffection and behaviour problems, even in the more academic schools, as signs that there is a growing 'mental health deficit among children.' (12)

Findings in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine (2000) isolated attending secondary school at 11 as the single social factor contributing to the onset of fatigue syndrome (ME). The majority of young sufferers get the illness at the age of 11, and three quarters succumb during September and December, coinciding with the first term at their new school.(13)

The New Economics Foundation think tank carried out a study for Nottingham City Council and found children's happiness drops when they move from primary to secondary school. The NEF suggest this can damage their curiosity about life. The Nef want to government to run a wider study to look at the transition from primary to secondary schools and reconsider educational models.(14)

Are the needs of the young adolescent being met?

The ages of nine to thirteen span a massive period of development, most significantly the transition through puberty. It is a confusing and often traumatic time in a child's life and school plays an important role in identifying emotional and behavioural problems at an early age.

The National Children's Bureau recently published a book called '9 to 13 – The forgotten years.' The report asks if sufficient attention is being paid to this age group.(15)

'The most compelling argument for increasing the focus on 9 to 13's is that these years are a time in the life-cycle when problems and difficulties may be emerging but when it is still not too late to stop them in their tracks.'

The book also acknowledges the need to look at school structures to cater for this age group.

'The widespread discontinuity of both curriculum and the style/organisation of teaching between primary and secondary schools is likely to compound the problems of adaptation by pupils during the transition. Developing and testing innovative new models which fundamentally reframe the boundaries between primary and secondary education may, accordingly, be worthy of investigation.'

Learning Mentors have been placed in secondary schools as part of the EiC (Excellence in Cities) Initiative. The main objective of a learning mentor is to help schools make progress in achieving their attainment, truancy and exclusion targets.

Much has been done to help children with the change, for example joint projects with primary and secondary students and summer schools run by primary and secondary teachers. A new post of Link teacher as a key figure working in partner with primary and secondary schools.

These initiatives have been successful for many schools although with truancy and exclusions on the rise and with the new reports about the emotional health of children there are still great concerns.

The most recent radical proposals from the Labour Party involve breaking up large secondary schools into more manageable smaller learning communities(16).

Labour's idea of smaller learning communities ties into extensive recent research carried out by New Zealand, Australia and America about the 'middle years'.

International Comparisons

Australia.

'Instead of waiting for students to half grow-up, then change at vulnerable times in their lives (primary – secondary), it makes sense to establish a specialised school setting within which to grow through puberty, to mature and become adults.'(17)
In 1996, Dr David Kemp, the commonwealth minister for schools launched National Middle School Project (NMSP). The purpose was to look at the specific needs of the young adolescent and to set up 'bridges' to the 'conventional primary-school divide'. Australia has been traditionally a two-tier system however since 2001 several purposes built Middle School have been built.

New Zealand.

New Zealand through a huge amount of research about the most effective way to meet the needs of the young adolescents New Zealand has begun to embrace the middle school movement.

'The move from primary to secondary education often results in a sense of discontinuity because of the different approaches of teachers in each sector..... when a young person's life is changing so rapidly there is an increased need for stability and a sense of continuity.'(18)

America

'A clear pattern has started to emerge from American cases study that a combination of middle school programmes with middle school structures seems to be highly effective in meeting the needs of the emerging adolescent.'(19)

In 'Bringing down the Barriers' The National Union of Teachers state: 'it is vital that we learn from and work with education systems internationally.(20)

A team from Hertfordshire's LEA visited Alabama, USA to study approaches 'to transition between educational phases. This is how they reported one of their experiences.(21)

‘The two school districts observed (Phoenix City and Russell County) comprised a very small number of schools. Essentially there was a pyramid system of several elementary schools feeding into a Middle or Junior High School, which in turn fed into a single High School. We found that this arrangement was conducive to effective transfer between schools. There was certainty about the route through the education system for both students and parents that helped allay anxiety about transition.

This is in stark contrast to the Hertfordshire model where a secondary school can have as many as fifty feeder primary schools, sometimes from across county boundaries, and the total number of schools in the authority is around 550.’

INCA is the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Archive. The website is funded by QCA and managed by NFER. A study by INCA called Lower secondary education: an international comparison (22) by Emma Greenaway looked at aspects of education in other countries. The study states:

‘It should be mentioned that some local education authorities in England have a three-tier system. It is worth considering whether this system, although increasingly rare, provides some answers to the problems of this stage of schooling.’

Are Middle Schools the solution?

From all this evidence can it be assumed that the educational pendulum is swinging towards smaller structures for the emerging adolescent? Strong pastoral support and understanding of this age group are crucial for their development. Are middle schools best placed to focus on 9-13 year olds in a smaller secure environment to identify problems at an early age before they spiral?

Ms Lesley Newhouse-Maiden a professor at Edith Cowan University (23), WA spent four months as a visiting fellow at Durham University 2003/2004. In her research she concluded that:

‘ Middle Schools I visited in Northumberland and Suffolk were the best practice schools for young adolescents by any standards. What is required is ongoing action research into the implementation of middle schooling in UK and it’s efficacy in the education, and pastoral care, of young adolescents for the 21st century.’

Northumberland is a very rural county. Middle Schools are the best structure to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children from the age of 9.

A parent asked the question below:

‘How can it help 9, 10 and 11 year olds to remain in our very small rural schools (cohort less than 12) rather than be able to develop socially and emotionally within a larger year group in our middle schools? (The majority of First Schools have less than 1FE (the min. recommended size),

Northumberland's County Council answer: Where there would be small rural primary schools, less than 105 pupils (this is less than 15 pupils per year group in a primary school) the models suggest that schools either combine or federate. This would mean that the pupil groupings could effectively be larger, even if the schools do not combine on to one site.

In addition the children would be able to benefit from the wider range of teacher expertise and skills in the schools that combine or federate.

Another consequence of moving to primary schools would be that the year 7 and 8 children currently attending middle schools would benefit from the much wider range of facilities and expertise available in larger secondary schools.'

It has already been proved earlier in this response that large secondary schools do not have a positive effect on year 7 and 8 children.

Small primary schools are vital for rural communities. Federations between primary materialised to make small primary schools viable therefore safe from closure. Small rural primary schools are very important and can be very effective however concerns about mixed class ability especially in years 5 and 6 have been raised.

Paul Weston, adviser with responsibility for small schools, evaluated standards in small primary schools in Leicestershire (24). He found that many small schools have successful features but there were concerns raised about mixed ability classes.

- A key issue for action is to further meet the needs of more able children.
- The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in older mixed classes causes concern.
- Attainment in ICT in all small schools is still cause for serious concern.

One headteacher commented in a study about implementing literacy hour to a mixed ability class:

'In lessons you tend to aim at the middle which means that you are not stimulating the brighter pupils and you've lost the less able ones.' Galton and Patrick (1990).(25)

The Local Government Association (LGA) who represent local authorities in England and Wales put together a working group of councillors to discuss issues surrounding education in rural areas(26). As well as mixed ability classes they also highlighted the adverse affect on older children's social development, with reduced opportunities for social interaction and developing friendships with children of their own age.

Would small primary schools be better than middle schools that already offer specialist teaching and social opportunities for years 5 and 6?

Central to student's needs are the teachers.

The Northumberland County Council is proposing a ten to fifteen year wait until the proposed change is implemented with an uncertainty surrounding the funding of such a whole scale project. What will happen to the enthusiasm and motivation to the teachers during this uncertain time?

In September 2004 Northampton started a re-organisation to change their current three-tier structure to a two-tier.

‘A head teacher has denied his school, where 15 teachers are off sick and 12 more have resigned, is in crisis. Northampton National Union of Teachers' spokesman Gordon White said they had had complaints from members of high levels of stress and indiscipline among the students before half term.’
BBC News December 200

Bradford school re-organisation had the same scenario with Bradford's Occupational Health department predicting significant staff absence due to stress. (27)

The Future of Education?

The ‘middle years’ of education is changing. The government, think tanks and educationalists have new alternative ideas about the curriculum and structure for the 21st century adolescent.

A parent asked about the future of education.

‘If, as your evidence shows, children’s performance dips immediately after a School transfer, then why was the system changed from 2 tier to 3 tier in the first place ?? Will this tier change be the final one or will it change again in another 15 to 20 years ??

Answer: Northumberland County Council was one of a relatively small number of LEAs to change to a three-tier system of schools in the 1970s. At this time performance data did not exist in the same way as it does today.

It is not possible to predict what a national system of education might look like in 15 or 20 years time.’

This is an important statement. The future of education is unknown.

Before radically altering the educational system of Northumberland serious debate should be given to the evidence, research and opinions of leading educators in this response about what will be the best decision for the health and welfare of the children of Northumberland

Are large secondary schools the future?

It is well publicised that the single transfer is a huge problem in education. It is well known large secondary schools have behaviour, bullying and drug problems. The research that is emerging (too much to put in this response) overwhelmingly advocates smaller school structures for the future of education. Great attention should be given to the mental needs of children, as it is a vital educational aswell as a health issue.

Does Northumberland already have a structure that caters for adolescents of the 21st century?

Northumberland's education standards are above average and rising. Northumberland has one of the lowest truancy statistics in the country (28). Most ofsted reports of Northumberland's Middle Schools rate them high in attendance, personal development, relationships and behaviour.

Mr David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools recently stated (March 2004) at a meeting about 'The Work of Ofsted':

'Just changing say from a three-tier system to a two –tier system would seem to be not an absolute guarantee of future success. Other things like are the teachers appropriately trained? Are the leadership and management capable of leading these news schools? Are the transition arrangements handled well from one structure? All of those seem to me to be equally important and we should not just assume that a three-tier system going to two-tier system would magically improve standards.'

Is closing Middle Schools the best way forward for Northumberland's school children?

Is this a progressive or a regressive step?