

National Middle Schools' Forum

The Voice of the Middle Schools

Middle Schools Matter

Celebrating Success



Celebrating success.

Middle schools play an important part in our education system. There are some 500 middle schools across the country – from the Isle of Wight to Northumberland. A number of counties, such as Suffolk and Bedford, have significant numbers of middle schools. In a period of increasing diversity within the education system nationally there is much to be learned from the experience of the middle school movement.

The National Middle School Forum exists to develop links between national initiatives and middle schools. For example, the lack of the difficulties associated with transfer at age 11 in middle schools means that we have a distinctive contribution to make to the current national debate about standards of achievement and social inclusion at Key Stage 3.

The purpose of this paper is to draw together available evidence about the successes of the middle school system and highlight some of its strengths.

A rationale for middle school education

What do we know about the 8 to 13 age group? This period represents the transition from the world of the young child to that of the young adult. It is distinctive of this stage in their development that pupils work out for themselves who they are and what they believe. They are equipped with the basic skills and ready for wider horizons than can be offered by a traditional primary school. The middle school can provide the security and stability that is critical for the growing self-confidence of the young adult.

The Plowden report recognised these distinctive features of the middle years. The traditional transition at 11 had grown up for largely historical reasons. Following an investigation of different systems in this country and abroad, the report recommended the adoption of a system of schooling based upon the distinctive stages of child development. The middle school movement was born.

What advantages does the middle school system offer?

- Access to specialist teachers and specialist facilities from 8 or 9. – Children enjoy working with a range of teachers and are ready to use technology rooms and science laboratories.
- A relatively small and secure environment, where they are well known, in which to thrive and develop.
- Staff who can specialise in teaching Key Stage 3 – with the specialist rooms and facilities required.
- A planned and smooth transition from the world of the primary classroom to the wider opportunities of an upper school.
- Pupils arrive at their upper school keen and eager for success at a stage when traditionally disaffection and disenchantment begin to affect traditional secondary schools.

“I am not convinced by the argument that children should move at the end of a key stage. There is a lot to be said for leaving them with the teachers who know them and can put right any weaknesses which have been found by the tests. There is no evidence that our middle school children are losing out. They get access to specialist teachers earlier than they would in primary schools, liaison between the tiers is excellent, because it has to be, and I think both age groups benefit.”

- Chris Tipple, former CEO Northumberland C.C. , Independent 30/01/1997

Continuity across the key stages is a national concern. Middle schools are ideally situated to support and develop initiatives to ensure that the key stages are not seen in isolation but as part of a whole curriculum.

Evidence of success.

In March 2001, David Howarth, Statistical Information Manager at the Research Analysis and International Division provided the Forum with descriptive data from Ofsted inspections comparing the outcomes for middle schools with other forms of schooling. The results are summarised below.

Table showing percentage of schools inspected that were satisfactory or better in each aspect

Aspect	9-13 middle	primary	secondary
What sort of school is it?			
1C Improvement since last inspection	64	58	54
1D Overall effectiveness	81	63	65
1E Value for money	69	56	59
How high are standards?			
2B Key Stage 2	64	55	
2B Key Stage 3	65		52
2B School	63	56	58
2C Attitudes to school	100	92	79
2D Behaviour	95	86	73
2E Personal development & relationships	100	87	80
2F Attendance	62	46	41
How well are pupils and students taught?			
3A Teaching	83	73	74
3B Learning	85	71	70
How good are curricular and other opportunities			
4A Quality and range of learning opportunities	67	51	50
4B Appropriate statutory curriculum in place	49	26	20
4C Provision for Social, moral, spiritual & cultural	91	81	67
How well does the school care for its pupils?			
5A Child protection & welfare	79	73	69
How well does the school work in partnership with parents?			
6A Parents views of the school	74	82	71
Progress of gifted and talented	60	36	38
How well pupils with SEN learn	80	68	59
Effectiveness of teaching methods	83	61	61
Management of pupils	92	80	75
Breadth & balance of curriculum	55	34	33
Effectiveness of teaching literacy	67	54	42
Effectiveness of teaching numeracy	45	54	21
Average figure	73.9	62.7	57.0

The figures show how successful our middle schools are. The figures are particularly striking in all those areas relating to ethos, culture, pupils' attitudes to school and behaviour. This relates back strongly to the rationale for middle schools made in the section above. These are important areas for parents and communities. They are also in striking contrast to national concerns about the growing disaffection of pupils in traditional secondary schools.

What do the results of national assessments show about the achievement of pupils in three tier systems?

Because pupils change schools at different points you have to consider the effectiveness of the system as a whole. There is increasing evidence that in terms of results in examinations there is little to choose between different systems.

At Key Stage 2 the results in 2001 showed that middle schools did slightly less well than all primary schools:

	Middle Schools	All schools
English	74%	75%
Maths	66%	71%
Science	87%	87%

However to quote from a letter from Professor David Jesson of the Centre for Performance Evaluation and Resource Management at the University of York:

'Key Stage 2 is not a 'terminal' qualification for Middle school pupils, and the evidence clearly points to performance levels here being 'lower' than in conventional junior/primary schools. This is the 'down side'. The other side is that 'overall progress' from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 is greater in secondary schools which receive their children predominantly from Middle schools – and that, by this stage, there is little to choose between outcome levels of secondary schools due to the structure of their entry age.

At Key Stage 2 most middle schools continue to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. While they meet the requirements of the Literacy and Numeracy strategies they have resisted the narrowing of the curriculum that has followed in many primary schools.

The National Middle Schools' Forum commissioned its own research into Middle School Effectiveness from the University of Keele. The research took two forms

- The analysis of data from Ofsted
- Pupil survey using existing instruments developed at Keele.

Main findings from study of OFSTED data

- At KS2, average pupil achievement in Middle deemed secondary (9 to 13) is graded higher than in other forms of schooling for all core subjects. This pattern is still evident at KS3 however, in both cases the differences are often small and close to the margins of error for the data.
- At KS2 OFSTED data for general school matters shows a mixed pattern of strengths and weaknesses for all forms of schooling with middle schools performing well in terms of 'content, breadth and balance of the curriculum' and showing slightly better pupil progress.
- At KS3 OFSTED data for general school matters shows a mixed pattern of strengths and weaknesses for all forms of schooling although a higher percentage of middle schools are reported as having satisfactory or better expectations and accommodation than other forms of KS3 schooling.
- The grades awarded to all forms of middle schools for ethos are significantly higher than those for secondary schooling and as good as or better than those in primary schools.
- 98% of middle schools are considered by OFSTED to give satisfactory or better value for money.

Main findings from the pupil attitude survey

Responses from Year 5 and 6 in 9 to 13 middle schools are marginally more positive than responses from year 5 and 6 in primary schools.

Responses from Year 7 pupils in secondary schools are marginally more positive than year 7 pupils in middle schools

In secondary schools and 9 to 13 middle schools there is a dip in pupil attitude between Year 7 and 8. This dip is less pronounced in middle schools than in secondary schools.

Meaningful Transitions

“Continuity in the curriculum and progression in learning as pupils move from primary to secondary schools are long standing weaknesses of the education system.”

- *Changing Schools*, HMI 2002

In their recent survey of progression across the transition from primary to secondary schools HMI found that while schools placed great importance on a smooth transfer, the educational progress of many pupils was either halted or reversed.

Research also shows that there is a dip in Years 3 and 4 and Year 8 when pupil progress is significantly slower (see *The Impact of School Transitions*, Galton et al DfES 1999). Pupils in Year 8 are no longer new to the school and National curriculum tests are some way off. This, it is suggested, leads in secondary schools to a lack of forward momentum arising from a perceived lack of purpose for Year 8 and a consequent rise in levels of pupil disaffection.

Contrast this with the middle school system:

- There is no transition at 11 and so the results of the Key Stage 2 tests can be used diagnostically to address identified weaknesses.
- Pupils in Year 8 are working hard to complete work for transfer and looking forward to their new school – disaffection is low.
- The transfer at the end of Year 8 forces schools to make effective arrangements for curriculum continuity as they share a key stage.
- Pupils in Year 9 arrive keen and eager to be successful in their new schools.

A study by Professor David Jesson of York University has compared the achievements of pupils who transfer between schools at different ages in their Key Stage 3 tests. The groups who consistently make better average progress between Key Stage 2 and 3 are those in middle schools.

Table showing average progress from KS2 to KS3 by type of school

	Junior	Infant/Junior	8-12 middle	9-13 middle
English	1.45	1.41	1.42	1.43
Maths	1.47	1.44	1.54	1.58
Science	1.21	1.18	1.23	1.32

(Performance and Progress of pupils in Secondary Schools of Differing Types. Professor David Jesson, University of York, 1999)

HMI also note that many primary school pupils in Year 6 do not make good progress after the Year 6 tests early in the summer term. In contrast many middle schools pupils begin their Key Stage 3 courses in June following the completion of the National Curriculum tests.

Social Inclusion

“Too many pupils make insufficient progress in Key Stage 3. The pace of learning slows and, on average, pupils only improve by one National Curriculum level in the core subjects during the three years to 14.”

- Annual Report, Her Majesties Chief Inspector, 2001

“Young people’s lack of success in the classroom can lead to disengagement from learning. That disengagement can lead to other, more serious problems. It is striking that 42% of all permanent exclusions throughout schooling occur in the first three years of secondary school.”

- Transforming Secondary Education, speech by Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education, March 2002

The rates of disaffection and exclusions are lower in middle school systems. The success of middle school systems in creating positive and purposeful climates for learning is clearly shown in the summary of Ofsted inspections on page 4 above. What middle schools are strikingly good at is developing positive attitudes to school among the pupils they serve. The behaviour of pupils is better, as is attendance.

As Estelle Morris went on to point out in her speech the social consequences of disengagement are high and can be seen in the literacy levels of the young people in our prisons and the increase in street crime among 11-14 year olds.

Developments at Key Stage 3

Key Stage 3 in secondary schools has been the focus of growing concern nationally. In March 2002 Estelle Morris expressed these concerns in her speech entitled "The Middle Years":

'Schools have tended to focus their efforts on later examination classes, and the teaching in the middle years has sometimes lacked pace and focus. We have accordingly seen worrying evidence of a dip in achievements of this age group, coupled in too many youngsters with disaffection and disengagement from learning as their motivation and enthusiasm has ebbed away. As HMCI reported in his most recent Annual Report "The fall off in pupils' attitudes to learning between Year 7 and 8 continues to be a distinctive feature."

There has been growing interest nationally in the rather different experience offered by middle school education.

Three middle school areas have been invited to participate in the trial of a two-year, foreshortened Key Stage 3 which was launched in December 2002. Such a development would obviously suit the 9 to 13 schools very well.

The Key Stage 3 strategy have approached a number of middle schools to provide case materials for use in national training. They have also consulted the Forum about tailoring training materials to the needs of middle schools.

Looking to the future

Several authorities have reviewed their middle school systems and decided to retain them.

In Northumberland the review was driven by a need to review the high number of surplus places in the county's schools. To quote from the reviews findings

‘Equally, 14-19 is emerging as a coherent phase of education but it isn't yet clear what impact this may or may not have on the structure of education. Whether 11-16 and 11-18 secondary school structures will continue to be as common as they are at present remains to be seen. There is also a question about whether Key Stage 3 will become a two-year rather than a three-year phase. If this did happen the whole of KS3 could be taught and assessed in Northumberland's middle schools and this would remove one of the arguments for changing the structure.

National performance data shows that attainment in primary schools is higher when compared to middle deemed secondary schools. However, this is reversed at secondary level where attainment in middle deemed secondary schools is higher compared to all non-selective secondary schools.

There is not enough evidence that a change in the structure would lead to an improvement in educational attainment, or would be worth the disruption that would occur over a long period of time, or would be worth making at the present time when there are uncertainties about the impact of Government policy. ’ (Education review of structure, Northumberland County Council, 2001)

Worcestershire has just reviewed the provision in Redditch and decided that:

‘ The overwhelming response from the consultation process was that the 3 tier system was right for Redditch and should be retained. The Director of Educational Services is of the opinion that both 3 tier and 2 tier systems can deliver quality outcomes and that the drive to improve standards over the next few years would best be served by retaining the present system, but with fewer, larger schools in each phase. ‘ (A brighter future for education in Redditch, Worcestershire County Council, 2002)

A review of Bromsgrove has also resulted in the retention of the middle schools.

A review of the middle school system in West Sussex has concluded that the system should be retained following strong local support for the retention of the present system.

The Forum also has developing contacts internationally with countries interested in developing middle school systems of their own. We have already been sharing practice with middle schools in the USA.