

# Middle schooling: What's the evidence?

Is middle schooling more effective than the traditional primary to secondary school structure? What happens in schools is more important than how they are arranged, according to **Stephen Dinham** and **Ken Rowe**.



*Stephen Dinham is the Research Director of ACER's Teaching, Learning and Leadership research program.*



*Ken Rowe was the Research Director of ACER's Learning Processes and Contexts research program until May 2008.*

The middle years are a critical period when young people experience substantial physical and emotional change. During this time, some students disengage or are alienated from learning, and growth in academic attainment can plateau or even fall. Some students struggle with literacy and numeracy, and some disengage from or fail to continue studies in mathematics and science.

These are also the years where attitudinal, behavioural and social problems can escalate. Absenteeism, suspension and expulsion from school are most common, especially for boys. It is a period when matters such as body image and sexual orientation can become critical issues for some.

Middle schooling is based on the idea that these problems are due, at least in part, to 'traditional schooling', and can be avoided by taking a different approach to school organisation, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

Since the mid-1980s, middle schooling has been considered a key educational reform initiative in English-speaking countries, including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, although it needs to be noted there are numerous models and approaches to middle school organisation. Many educators have seen middle schools as a panacea for the problems of upper primary-lower secondary schooling and adolescence in general.

While there has been a large volume of published work about middle schooling, there has been little evidence-based research. There is no shortage of strong views on the subject, both pro and con – but the available literature requires careful critique.

A recent review, conducted by ACER for the New Zealand Ministry of Education, aimed to examine the research on middle schooling, undertaken in order to inform policy

and practice relating to middle schooling in New Zealand.

Responses to the issues of middle schooling have ranged from the adoption of single strategies or interventions to totally integrated approaches, although the latter is more challenging and less common. It is relatively easy to examine data on student achievement, as well as on rates of suspension and absenteeism. It is more difficult to link these conclusively to school organisation, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

As noted, there is a serious lack of quantitative, evidence-based studies into the effects of middle schooling. Writings from advocates for middle schooling tend to be little more than aspirational, frequently bordering on rhetoric and ideology. As a result, other educators have voiced concerns as to whether middle schools actually deliver in terms of improved student achievement and engagement.

It is often difficult to gauge the impact of middle schooling because school staff frequently lack the skills, time and resources to accomplish these tasks. Teachers need time, space and external assistance if a strategy is to have a realistic chance of success. Reluctance of teachers (and schools) to change, poor preparation for and 'selling' of the change, together with imposition of extra responsibilities, can all put a brake on the success of new programs and approaches.

Longitudinal data on student achievement and how these relate to any initiative are also difficult to obtain and measure. As a result, judgements of success and failure are often based largely on teachers' perceptions, rather than on evidence linking interventions to measurable student achievement outcomes.

In education, too frequently, too much attention is paid to the conditions of teaching — 'fiddling around the edges' with matters such as school and class

organisation, rather than building evidence-based pedagogical capacity in a school's most valuable resource, its teachers. Middle schools are neither a good thing nor a bad thing, although it should be noted that middle schools are in serious decline in the US and UK, the two 'heartlands' of middle schooling.

As Professor Linda Darling-Hammond wrote in her 2000 review of student outcomes in the US, 'The effects of quality teaching on educational outcomes are greater than those that arise from students' backgrounds. ... The quality of teacher education and teaching appear to be more strongly related to student achievement than class sizes, overall spending levels or teacher salaries.'

What is actually done within classrooms and schools is the most important thing, not structures. Quality teaching and quality teachers are central to student achievement. On this, the research literature is powerful and unequivocal.

What matters most? The most important factors for high-quality education are quality teaching and learning provision; teaching standards; and ongoing teacher professional learning focused on evidence-based teaching practices that are demonstrably effective in maximising students' engagement, learning outcomes and achievement progress.

The full review, *Teaching and Learning in Middle Schooling: A Review of the Literature*, by Steve Dinham and Ken Rowe, is available for download from the New Zealand Ministry of Education website at <[www.educationcounts.govt.nz](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz)>

#### Reference

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). 'Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A review of state policy evidence'. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8 (1); at: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1>. ■



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