The Middle

By PETER MEYER

"Caught in the hurricane of hormones," the *Toronto Star* began a 2008 story about students in the Canadian capital's middle schools. Suspended "between childhood and the adult world, pre-teens have been called the toughest to teach."

"The Bermuda triangle of education," former Louisiana superintendent Cecil Picard once termed middle schools. "Hormones are flying all over the place."

Indeed, you can't touch middle school without hearing about "raging hormones."

Says Diane Ross, a middle-school teacher for 17 years and for 13 more a teacher of education courses for licensure in Ohio, "If you are the warm, nurturing, motherly, grandmotherly type, you are made for early childhood education. If you love math or science or English, then you are the high school type. If you love bungee jumping, then you are the middle school type."

Even in professional journals you catch the drift of "middle-school madness." *Mayhem in the Middle* was a particularly provocative study by Cheri Pierson Yecke published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in 2005. American middle schools have become the places "where academic achievement goes to die," wrote Yecke.

Hyperbole? Or sad reality? Sometime last year, while walking the hallway of my school district's middle school, I was pulled aside by one of our veteran teachers, who seemed agitated. I was more than happy to chat. I had known this teacher for years. Let's call her Miss Devoted: she is dedicated and hardworking, respected by her peers, liked by parents and teachers, one of those "good" teachers that parents lobby to have their children assigned to.

I mentioned that I was coming from a meeting with the literacy consultant, who had shown me her improvement strategy on a fold-out sheet with red arrows and circles that, I said, "looked like battle plans for the invasion of Normandy."

Miss Devoted rolled her eyes. "I understand," she said. "The progressives keep doing the same thing over and over, just calling it by different names.

"All I'm doing is going to meetings, filling out forms, getting training. My kids are struggling with substitute teachers."

Here was a bright and talented teacher in a school that had failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the infamous benchmark of the equally infamous 2002 No Child Left Behind law, for four consecutive years. That meant that nearly half of the school's 600 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th graders were failing to make grade-level in English and in math. Further, only 10 percent of the school's African American 8th graders (who made up 30 percent of the total) could pass the state's rudimentary math exams.

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School Mess

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Thus, a swarm of state education department consultants had descended on the school.

"Why won't they just let me teach?" Miss Devoted asked, clearly frustrated.

By all accounts, middle schools are a weak link in the chain of public education. Is it the churn of ill-conceived attempts at reform that's causing all the problems? Is it just hormones? Or is it the way in which we configure our grades? For most of the last 30 years, districts have opted to put "tweens" in a separate place, away from little tots and apart from the big kids. Middle schools typically serve grades 5–8 or 6–8. But do our quasi-mad preadolescents belong on an island—think *Lord of the Flies*—or in a big family, where even raging hormones can be mitigated by elders and self-esteem bolstered by little ones?

Parents and educators have begun abandoning the middle school for K–8 configurations, and new research suggests that grade configuration does matter: when this age group is gathered by the hundreds and educated separately, both behavior and learning suffer.

American middle schools have become the places "where academic achievement goes to die."

—Cheri Pierson Yecke

How Middle Schools Came to Be

Notwithstanding all the despairing headlines middle schools seem to provoke, the more interesting story may be how they became, in relatively few years and with hardly any solid research evidence to support the idea, "one of the largest and most comprehensive efforts at educational reorganization in the history of American public schooling," as middle-school researchers Paul George and Lynn Oldaker put it in 1985.

The core idea is generally traced to a speech given by William Alexander at a conference for school administrators at Cornell University in 1963. At that time, the dominant organizational structure of American schools was K–8 or K–6 and junior high, a two-year "bridge" to high school conceived in the early 20th century. In fact, the conference topic was "The Dynamic Junior High School," which was then at its peak, with more than 7,000 such schools in the U.S.

Alexander, then chairman of the department of education at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, was assigned the keynote address but he could find no "dynamism." He struggled over his speech, according to Jessica Hodge in a 1978 profile in *Kappa Delta Pi*. Thanks to a delayed flight on his way to Cornell, the professor got "the time he needed to outline a new focus and organization for the school 'between' the elementary and high school." That was, as history notes, the middle school. Too many junior highs had merely appended high-school practices on to the 7th and 8th grades, said Alexander, and so the bridge had become simply "a vestibule added at the front door of the high school." The schools, he suggested, had lost touch with the developmental needs of the preadolescent student.

Alexander told the gathered educators that these young students had their own needs, which were not being met in the junior high, including "more of the freedom of movement," "more appropriate health and physical education, more chances to participate in planning and managing their own activities, more resources for help on their problems of growing up, and more opportunities to explore new interests and to develop new aspirations." And he then set out what, given the subsequent battles, was his most dubious claim, that these students needed "exploratory experiences" rather than "greater emphasis [on] the academic subjects."

Alexander was reacting to that era's academic scare—*Sputnik* and its gremlins—and bemoaning the fact that greater emphasis on math, science, and "more homework" meant for many students "less time and energy for the fine arts, for homemaking and industrial arts, and for such special interests as dramatics, journalism, musical performance, scouting, camping, outside jobs, and general reading."

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The Me Generation Meets the Psychological Society

Alexander struck a nerve. "The content of his Cornell address would forever alter the nature of education at the middle level," concluded Hodge. "Educators and citizens were receptive to creating schools that respond to the needs of young people."

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In a few short years, middle schoolers would go from *Growing Up Forgotten*, the title of a 1977 report by the Ford Foundation, to being what David Hough, then director of the Institute for School Improvement at Missouri State University and managing editor of the *Middle Grades Research Journal*, described as "studied, researched, and analyzed with a greater degree of exuberance and sophistication than ever before."

In the 1960s and 1970s, many social and political institutions began to be viewed through the prism of psychiatry and sociology and so, in schools, through the personal psyches of individual students. Middle schools, brand new, were the blank slates for the child-centered, social-environment pedagogues. And what better population of student to study and nurture than, as education journalist Linda Perlstein puts it, youngsters whose "bodies and psyches morph through the most radical changes since infancy, leaving them torn between anxiety and ardor, dependence and autonomy, conformity and rebellion."

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March of the Mediocracy

"Holding pen" is a harsh phrase, but it is not surprising that it slipped into the middle-school lexicon as the focus on preadolescent emotional development seemed to overwhelm the academics. By 1989, when President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors met in Charlottesville, Virginia, for the heralded education summit, that worm was beginning to turn. Academic mediocrity was not a hard case to make, since middle-school proponents had given, at best, lip service to academics almost from the inception of the model.

"I don't know if it was deliberate or not," recalls Trish Williams, executive director of EdSource, a California nonprofit, "but I know that when my kids were in middle school, one of the best in California, one of the teachers told me that her job was to just hold them and keep them safe until they get through puberty. So there has been a philosophy in middle school which deemphasized academic outcomes…."

As Hough noted in 1991, their popularity was "linked to programmatic characteristics…not to student outcome measures."

The editors of *Phi Delta Kappan* recognized early signs of trouble when they devoted a special issue to middle schools in 1997 and noted an abundance of "observational studies," but "little quantitative information to satisfy the demands of thoughtful practitioners and policymakers for assessment of those efforts." They pointed out that what quantitative work there was attested to "the intellectual underdevelopment of too many young adolescents," noting that only 28 percent of 8th graders nationally scored at or above the "proficient" level in reading in 1994. Indeed, it was beginning to be apparent that middle schools were doing little to help educate children academically.

In the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), students who had yet to enter middle school fared better than those who had nearly completed those grades. U.S. 4th graders scored 12th among 26 countries in math while 8th graders ranked 18th. "These statistics about young adolescents' poor academic performance suggest that many middle-grades schools are failing to enable the majority of their students to achieve at anywhere near adequate levels," noted the *Phi Delta Kappan* editors.

Nothing much has changed since then. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show the middle-school lacunae. While U.S. 4th graders increased their NAEP math scale scores by 24 points between 1978 and 2008, 8th graders improved by 17 points during the same period. And while 4th-grade readers improved by 10 points during a similar period, the nation's 8th graders improved by just 4 points. Middle schools seem to be dampening the modest improvements being made by our primary schools.

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are those that eschew the tenets of middle schoolism.

Lightning struck when Yecke published her middle-school broadsides, *The War Against Excellence* (2003) and, two years later, *Mayhem in the Middle*. Those reports caught the No Child Left Behind wave perfectly, presenting a searing condemnation of middle schools' failures to educate a large swath of children. "The middle school movement advances the notion that academic achievement should take a back seat to such ends as self-exploration, socialization, and group learning," says Yecke in *Mayhem*.

Trish Williams

Sure, Some Middle Schools Work

There is no doubt that some middle schools are working. Unfortunately, the answer to the "what works" question is an elusive one. Veteran middle-school educators John Lounsbury and Gordon Vars, for instance, claim that "when the tenets of the [middle school] concept are implemented fully over time, student achievement and development increase markedly." In a 2003 story for the *Middle School Journal*, they argue that there is "hard evidence that the middle school does in fact work," but they don't supply that evidence. Instead, we are treated to empathetic descriptions of "legions of genuinely good teachers both touching lives and successfully teaching skills and content in hundreds of middle schools" and hear the complaint that "most of the mandated assessments being used to determine students' attainment of the standards focus heavily on recall of facts, one of the lowest forms of thinking." Or, "Is it too extreme an exaggeration to suggest that high-stakes testing may be lobotomizing an entire generation of young people?"

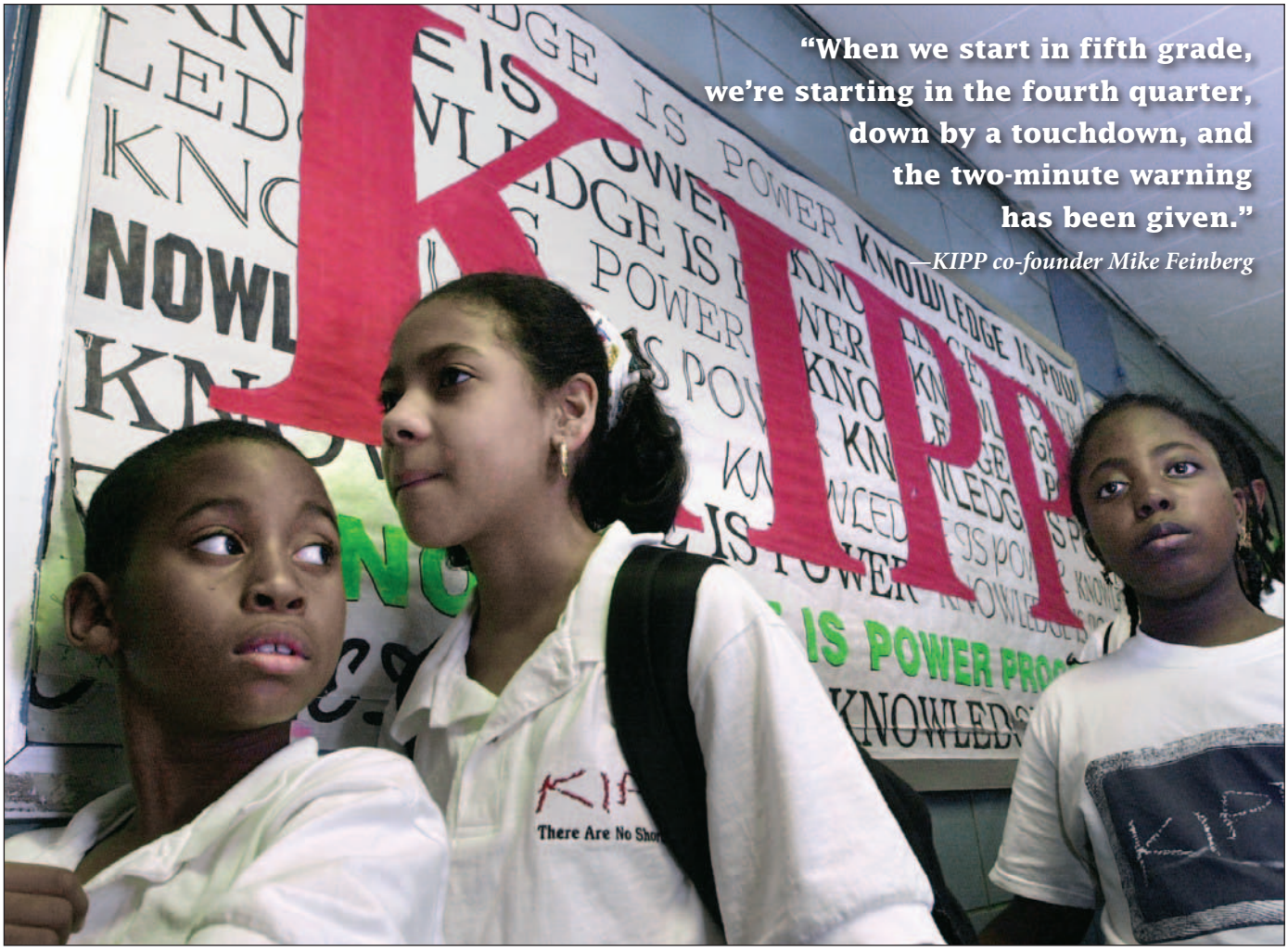
Michael Kirst

Ironically, the middle schools that we know "work" are those that eschew the tenets of middle schoolism. Charter schools like the Young Women's Leadership School and those operated by the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), and private networks like the NativityMiguel schools—several dozen of which serve low-income, inner-city students—have proven that proper pedagogy and academic focus can overcome the developmental challenges of preadolescence. A recent study of 22 KIPP middle schools found "significant" gap-closing results in math and reading achievement at about half of the schools. The Mathematica Policy Research report found that, after three years in the schools, students showed gains in math equal to 1.2 years of extra instruction and in reading almost a full extra year of improvement compared to outcomes for students in schools with similar demographics. The "effects are pretty striking and impressive," Brian Gill of Mathematica told *Education Week*.

The latest evidence of middle-school potential is a study from EdSource released in February 2010. "Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better" is, says Trish Williams, "the largest study of middle grades education ever conducted."

Under the guidance of Williams and Michael Kirst, professor emeritus of education and business administration at Stanford University, a group of researchers from EdSource and Stanford looked into the "black box" of middle-school performance to analyze how district and school policies and practices are linked to higher student performance. Controlling for student background, they studied 303 middle schools and compared 200,000 student scores on California's standardized tests in mathematics and English to responses to school practices surveys provided by 303 principals, 3,752 English and math teachers, and 157 superintendents.

"Our findings were surprising in their consistency," the report concludes. The 44 higher-performing schools (those with average school-wide math and English test scores a full standard deviation above the mean) "create a shared, school-wide intense focus on the improvement of student outcomes," it says. Those high-performing schools did things like "set measurable goals on standards based tests and benchmark tests across all proficiency levels, grades, and subjects"; create school missions that were "future oriented," with curricula and instruction designed to prepare students to succeed in a rigorous high-school curriculum; include improvement of student



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outcomes "as part of the evaluation of the superintendent, the principal, and the teachers"; and communicate to parents and students "their responsibility as well for student learning, including parent contracts, turning in homework, attending class, and asking for help when needed."

The EdSource study findings echo many of the principles espoused by successful "no excuses" charter schools like KIPP. But do we really want more middle schools, when only a very small portion of them will have what it takes to succeed?

Grade Configuration May Matter

The trends suggest that grade configuration matters to at least some parents and educators, who decided some time ago that separately configured schools for preadolescents are not the best way to go. Even KIPP, which has primarily served grades 5–8, began in 2006 a strategy of siting its schools in pre-K–12 "clusters." Of KIPP's current roster of 99 schools, 60 are stand-alone middle schools; the rest are Pre-K–4 elementary (24) and 9–12 high schools (15). "When we start in fifth grade, we're starting in the fourth quarter,

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down by a touchdown, and the two-minute warning has been given," KIPP co-founder Mike Feinberg was fond of saying about running middle schools. "Every second counts, and there's no margin for error." With the new emphasis on clustering, he says, "we're still down by a touchdown," but it's the first quarter.

Though the 6–8 middle school remains the dominant school configuration for the age group (roughly, ages 11 to 14), a countertrend has been building for much of the last decade. How many separate middle schools remain today? The numbers are not easy to pin down. Hough, now dean of the education school at Missouri State, has been tracking middle schools for 20 years and says their numbers peaked in 2005 with just over 9,000 across the United States. And he cites data from the National Center for Education Statistics that puts the number for the 2007–08 school year at 8,500. Hough says that "the trend is definitely away from stand-alone middle schools" and estimates there will be fewer than 7,950 when the 2010 data are in. The number of "elemiddle" schools, the new term for K–8 schools, has jumped from 4,000 nationwide to just under 7,000 in the last 10 years, says Hough. Cleveland has closed all 16 of its middle schools, re-opening most as K–8 schools. Philadelphia has closed 21 of its 46 middle schools since 2002. Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Maryland are all rethinking the 5–8 and 6–8 school configurations, says Hough, and cities such as Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Portland (Oregon), and Baltimore have already moved away from 6–8 middle schools.

Veteran New York educator Kathleen Cashin, a regional superintendent in the city's sprawling system, explained the trend away from middle schools six years ago, before it was a trend, when she told the *New York Times* that parents "were clamoring" for a return to K–8 schools. "It's an elementary-like nurturing environment," she said. "Because children are older doesn't mean they don't need that nurturing care of a loving, caring adult. I have found the attendance is better, almost always. The violence is less, the younger kids defuse the older and the academics are at least as good if not better."

This sums up much of what I heard from parents I spoke with about middle schools, even as some educators remained reluctant to acknowledge the possible importance of grade configuration. Meanwhile, parents are voting with their feet, and reformers can draw on recent research that offers little support for the stand-alone middle-school model.

Researchers Confirm What Parents Know

First, from North Carolina comes evidence that separating middle-school children from the other grades may exacerbate behavioral problems. "Is there a 'best' grade configuration for schools that serve early adolescents?" ask researchers Philip Cook, Robert MacCoun, Clara Muschkin, and Jacob Vigdor in a 2008 study in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

The "conventional wisdom" on grade configuration, Cook and colleagues say, "has changed several times over the past century," as we have seen. To see what impact configuration may be having today, they studied public schools in North Carolina, which has "led the national trend of incorporating sixth grade" into their middle-school program. In 1999–2000, more than 90 percent of the Tar Heel State's 379 middle schools served grades 6–8. By comparing the grade 6 cohorts that were not in a separate middle school to those that were, the researchers found some remarkable results: "students who attend middle school in sixth grade are twice as likely to be disciplined relative to their counterparts in elementary school." They found that the behavioral problems of these middle-school 6th graders "persist beyond the sixth grade year" and that "exposing sixth graders to older peers has persistent negative consequences on their academic trajectories."

The results of the Cook et al. research complement those of Kelly Bedard and Chau Do, whose 2005 study of national data found that moving 6th graders to middle school resulted in a 1 to 3 percent decline in on-time high-school graduation rates. Bedard and Do conclude that the decrease in graduation rates of middle schoolers is "a surprising result for a program

with the stated aim of aiding less able students." Given the oft-studied economic impacts associated with graduation rates, e.g., lifetime earnings, unemployment, and incarceration rates, "the negative economic implications of less on-time high school completion may be far reaching and multifaceted."

Perhaps the most telling research about the impact of middle-school grade configuration is a recent study of New York City middle schools by Jonah Rockoff and Benjamin Lockwood (see "Stuck in the Middle," *research*, Fall 2010). The Columbia Business School researchers studied the impacts of grade configuration on learning and concluded that "middle schools are not the best way to educate students" in districts like New York City. In fact, they argue that "students who enter public middle schools in New York City fall behind their peers in K–8 schools." The effects are large, present for both math and English, and evident for girls as well as boys. And perhaps most troubling, "students with lower initial levels of academic achievement fare especially poorly in middle school."

Like the Cook research on behavior, the Rockoff and Lockwood study finds that the negative achievement effect on children who moved into middle school "persists at least through 8th grade, the highest grade for which we could obtain test scores."

The one caveat Rockoff made about this research is the effect of school size. "In New York City all the buildings are roughly the same size, which means that a 6–8 school and K–8 school have the same number of students," says Rockoff. It may make "a very big difference" if you have 250 kids in a 6th grade (which is what you typically have in a 6–8 school) rather than 80 (which is what you might have in a K–8 school). "Imagine if you're in a K–8 school, you have 900 kids across nine grades, and one out of every ten 6th to 8th graders is making trouble. So you have 30 troublemakers in the school. Now, imagine a middle school with 900 kids but only three grades, 300 per grade. They have 90 troublemakers in the school instead of 30."

Needless to say, that makes teaching—and learning—far more difficult.

Peter Meyer is a former news editor at Life *magazine and senior visiting fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.*