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CHARACTERISTICS OF NEBRASKA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Ed.D. 1986

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PREVIEW

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CHARACTERISTICS OF NEBRASKA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

by

Larry E. Bradley

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Administration,
Curriculum & Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Frederick C. Wendel

Lincoln, Nebraska

July, 1986

TITLE

Characteristics of Nebraska Middle Schools

BY

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PREVIEW

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CHARACTERISTICS OF NEBRASKA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Larry E. Bradley, Ed. D.

University of Nebraska, 1986

Advisor: Frederick C. Wendel

The middle school has evolved into the predominate form of middle grade organization. Because of declining enrollments in many of Nebraska's largest districts, the middle school concept was studied and considered for adoption as an alternative in middle grade education. However, little was known about middle school education in Nebraska.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to define middle schools by the characteristics in the curricular and instructional plans and to assess to what degree Nebraska middle schools were in agreement with these characteristics.

Research Design

The review of literature produced 37 characteristics which in a series of steps were reduced to nine essential instructional and curricular characteristics of middle school education. A questionnaire was designed based on these nine characteristics and administered to all 24 principals in Nebraska schools called middle schools. A 100 percent return was received. On-site visitations were conducted in a representative group of schools to check on the reliability of the data received in the questionnaire.

Conclusions

From the study of the literature the instructional and curricular practices can be reduced to nine essential characteristics. Some of the conclusions that were drawn from the review of the questions include (a) basic skill instruction is strongly emphasized, (b) the majority of the schools have a secondary oriented guidance program, (c) the concept of exploration existed to varying degrees, (d) the concept of individualization was addressed but narrowly defined, (e) in-service education on middle school topics was greatly needed, (f) interdisciplinary teaching teams existed but effected only a minority of teachers and students, and (g) the transition concept from elementary to secondary schools had been seriously addressed.

Recommendations

Some of the recommendations include:

1. Guidelines need to be developed by the Nebraska State Department of Education concerning exemplary practices of middle schools.
2. In-service programs in Nebraska are needed on topics of middle school characteristics.
3. Case studies on converting junior highs to middle schools are needed.

Acknowledgements

As this quest draws closer to fruition one is reminded of the many people responsible for any success the project has had to date. Appreciation is extended first to my advisor, Dr. Frederick C. Wendel, who had to take on an advisee two-thirds through a program and yet offered me constant attention as though I had been his advisee through the process. I also wish to express my appreciation to the members of my committee: Dr. Dale K. Hayes, Dr. C. Cale Hudson, Dr. Willis Moreland, and Dr. Rex K. Reckewey, for their help and advice. Also, Dr. Fred Bellum, thank you for your constant encouragement to complete the program. There is need to express appreciation to the various other people at Columbus Junior High who have provided continual support. To Barbara Kapperman, who has gone through the highs and lows of the process with caring and professionalism far beyond any reasonable expectation, my sincere gratitude is extended.

Finally, to my wife, Connie, and daughter, Lisa -- I can never repay the sacrifice they have been required to experience these past eight years. Connie, your help has been immeasurable. I can only hope that we will look on this experience someday and share a little pride in feeling that it was really worth the struggle.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

The Research Problem

Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Statement of the Objectives.....	3
Definitions.....	4
Assumptions.....	4
Limitations.....	5
Significance of the Study.....	5

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Introduction.....	7
Historical Perspective.....	7
Characteristics of Middle Schools.....	13
Summary.....	24

CHAPTER III

Research Methods and Procedures

Introduction.....	26
The Sample.....	26
The Design.....	27
The Survey.....	33
Characteristics:	
Basic Skills.....	33
A Guidance and Counseling Program	34
Exploration.....	34
Individualization.....	35

Staff Training.....	35
Flexible Schedules.....	36
Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.....	36
Social Development.....	36
Transition From Elementary to Secondary Education.....	37
Instrumentation.....	37
On-Site Visitation.....	38
Data Analysis.....	39
CHAPTER IV	
Analysis of Data	
Introduction.....	40
Questionnaire Data.....	40
Background Information.....	40
Introduction To Curricular & Instructional Practices.....	
Basic Skills.....	45
Basic Skill Summary and Analysis.....	48
Guidance and Counseling.....	49
Guidance and Counseling Summary and Analysis.....	53
Exploration.....	54
Exploration Summary and Analysis.....	61
Individualization.....	61
Individualization Summary and Analysis.....	65
Staff Training.....	65
Staff Training Summary and Analysis.....	70
Program Organization.....	71

Program Organization Summary and Analysis.....	74
Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.....	75
Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams Summary and Analysis.....	77
Social Development.....	79
Social Development Summary and Analysis.....	85
Transition From Elementary To Secondary School.....	86
Transition From Elementary To Secondary School Summary and Analysis.....	89
Summary of Questionnaire Data.....	90
On-Site Visitation.....	91
Community 1.....	92
Facility	92
Basic Skills.....	93
Guidance and Counseling.....	94
Exploration.....	94
Individualization.....	94
Staff Training.....	95
Program Organization.....	95
Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.....	96
Social Development.....	96
Transition From Elementary To Secondary School.....	97
Summary.....	97
Community 2.....	97
Facility.....	98

Basic Skills.....	98
Guidance and Counseling.....	99
Exploration.....	99
Individualization.....	99
Staff Training.....	100
Program Organization.....	100
Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.....	100
Social Development.....	100
Transition From Elementary To Secondary School.....	101
Summary.....	101
Community 3.....	101
Facility.....	102
Basic Skills.....	103
Guidance and Counseling.....	103
Exploration.....	104
Individualization.....	104
Staff Training.....	105
Program Organization.....	105
Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.....	105
Social Development.....	106
Transition From Elementary To Secondary School.....	106
Summary.....	106
Community 4.....	107
Facility.....	108
Basic Skills.....	109

Guidance and Counseling.....	109
Exploration.....	109
Individualization.....	110
Staff Training.....	110
Program Organization.....	110
Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.....	111
Social Development.....	111
Transition From Elementary To Secondary School.....	111
Summary.....	112
Summary of On-Site Visitations.....	113
CHAPTER V	
Summary of the Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations Summary.....	115
Restatement of the Problem and Objectives...	115
Design of the Study.....	116
Findings.....	116
Findings From the Literature.....	116
Findings From the Study.....	117
Conclusions.....	121
Recommendations.....	123
References.....	125
Appendix A: State Department's Response to the Study.....	129
Appendix B: Schools Listed in the <u>Nebraska Education Directory</u> (1985-86) as Middle Schools.....	130

Appendix C: Interest Expressed in This Study By Nebraska's Largest Districts.....	131
Appendix D: Letter to Survey Respondents.....	132
Appendix E: Questionnaire On Nebraska Middle Schools.....	133
Appendix F: Members of Panel of Judges.....	141
Appendix G: Schools Selected for On-site Visitations..	142

List of Tables

Table

1	Instructional and Curricular Characteristics of Middle Schools from the Literature.....	28-31
2	Years of Experience in Cohorts, Means and Ranges.....	42
3	Number and Percentage of Facilities Built For Middle School.....	43
4	Class Grade Served Cohorts.....	43
5	Cohorts, Range, Mean and Median of Student Enrollment in Nebraska Middle Schools.....	44
6	Number of Counselors in Cohorts, Mean, Mode and Median.....	44
7	Categories of Middle School Practices.....	46
8	Special Help & Basic Skill Emphasis.....	47
9	Number and Percentage of Guidance Counselor Involvement.....	50
10	Number and Percentage of Available Guidance Services.....	52
11	Number of Required and Elective Classes Offered in Nebraska Middle Schools.....	55

List of Tables (Continued)

Table

12	Number and Percentage of Electives and Mini-Courses Offered.....	60
13	Number and Percentage of Hands-on Elective Courses.....	62
14	Number and Percentage of Responses to Questions Asked About the Characteristic of Individualization.....	64
15	Number and Percentage of Teacher Training and Experience.....	66-67
16	Number and Percentage of Staff Training Experience.....	69
17	Number and Percentage of Types of Master Class Schedules.....	72-73
18	Number and Percentage of Responses to Questions on Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.....	76
19	Number and Percentage of Yes and No Answers to Questions on Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams....	78
20	Grade and Percentage of Responses To Questions on Social Development.....	80

List of Tables (Continued)

Table

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 21 | Number and Percentage of Responses to
Questions on Social Development..... | 82-83 |
| 22 | Number and Percentage of Yes and No Responses
to Questions on Transition from Elementary to
Secondary School..... | 87-88 |

CHAPTER I

The Research Problem

Introduction

Because of declining enrollments in many of Nebraska's largest districts during the early 1980s, the climate developed for a revolution in middle grade education. Since 1950 middle schools have emerged as viable institutions in American education. Although the mission, standards, and reasons for existence vary, the impact of the middle schools on middle grade education in America has been considerable. Regardless of the reasons for the rise of middle schools, little was known in 1986 about middle schools in Nebraska.

The first middle school was in Bay City, Michigan, in 1950 according to Gatewood and Dils (1975). In 1978 Brooks identified 4,060 middle schools in operation across the nation. This rapid growth was termed by Soares and others (1973) as "one of the most notable educational movements of the decade" (p. 381). In 1975 Gatewood and Dils stated this growth was "the most remarkable phenomena in the history of American education." Spiegel termed middle schools "as a landmark development in American education" (1977, p. 2).

There was an abundance of literature but little consensus concerning the middle school movement in the United States. The quotations which follow demonstrated the magnitude of differing perceptions professionals had in describing a middle school. "Humanizing education -- that is what the middle school is all about," Overly and others declared in 1972 (p. 3). "I like to

talk about the middle school as a school of change," Grooms wrote (1967). Lounsbury and Vars perceived the movement as a "new opportunity, a new rallying point, a fresh start" (1971, p. 158). Others viewed middle schools as an attempt to correct what they perceived as the failings of the junior high schools in America. According to Brimm (1969) "the middle school movement was basically a reactionary movement against existing structure" (p. 1). Hull (1965) termed the junior high "America's greatest educational blunder" (p. 213). The majority of the criticisms of junior highs centered on the program, and not on the concept behind the intended philosophy of junior high schools. Eichhorn summarized (1980) many of the critics in stating that the junior high school mimicked too closely the educational approach of the high school. Moss in 1969 summarized middle school advocates' criticisms of the junior high school. The following list summarized that criticism.

Junior high schools never achieved their original purposes.

Junior high schools evolved in a "cheap imitation" of the high school.

The ninth grade continued to emphasize college preparation despite being housed in seventh and eighth grade.

Junior high schools tended to encourage racial segregation by delaying the departure from neighborhood schools until seventh grade. (pp. 18-19)

Regardless of the reasons, the middle school movement spread across America and the literature abounded with philosophical principles and proposals for the establishment of the middle

school concept. Middle schools were seen by writers in the field as being more than a substitute name for junior high schools. A contention in the literature was middle schools were developmentally and rationally a valid approach to education at the intermediate level. Writers advocated the middle school to better meet the needs of early adolescence during the transition from elementary to high school.

By 1986 middle schools had been in existence for a sufficient time for consensus to develop in the literature about their characteristics. Coincidentally, declining enrollment in many of Nebraska's secondary school districts resulted in inefficient building utilization and created renewed interest in the middle school. In August of 1985 no separate list of middle schools in Nebraska existed according to Nebraska State Department officials (see Appendix A). The task was to identify from the literature the consensus of ideal characteristics for middle schools and to determine to what extent they existed in Nebraska middle schools.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to define middle schools by the characteristics in the literature of middle school curricular and instructional plans and to assess to what degree Nebraska middle schools were in agreement with those characteristics.

Statement of the Objectives

1. To present from the literature desirable characteristics of instructional and curricular plans for the middle school.
2. To determine current instructional practices in Nebraska