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Taking Middle Schoolers Out of the Middle

By ELISSA GOOTMAN

When John Smith, a swaggering sixth grader at one of New York City's growing collection of kindergarten-through eighth-grade schools, feels lost, he heads downstairs to the colorful classroom of his former third-grade teacher, Randi Silverman, for what she calls a "Silverman hug."

"When I get mad I go to her," John, 11, said amid the lunchtime buzz in the cafeteria of his school, Public School 105, on the Rockaway peninsula in Queens. "When I feel frustrated I'll go to her. When I feel like I can't do it no more I go to her, and she tells me I have to do it."

Miles away at Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem, a 6th- through 12th-grade school, teachers keep the sixth graders looking forward, toward college. One recent morning, a class peppered a guidance counselor, Michael Lloyd, with queries, from "Where is Harvard?" to "What does Ph.D. stand for?"

The two schools, in disparate corners of the nation's largest school system, are part of a national effort to rethink middle school, driven by increasingly well-documented slumps in learning among early adolescents as well as middle school crime rates and stubborn high school dropout rates.

The schools share the premise that the way to reverse years of abysmal middle school performance is to get rid of middle schools entirely. But they represent opposite poles in the sharp debate over whether 11- through 13-year-olds are better off pushed toward adulthood or coddled a little longer.

Should the nurturing cocoon of elementary school be extended for another three years, shielding 11-year-olds from the abrupt transition to a new school, with new students and teachers, at one of the most volatile times in their lives?

Paul Vallas, chief executive of the Philadelphia school system, thinks so, and he has closed 17 traditional middle schools since 2002, while converting some three dozen elementary schools into K-8s. "The fifth to sixth grade transition is just too traumatic," he said. "At a time when children are undergoing emotional, physical, social changes, and when they need stability and consistency, suddenly they're thrust into this alien environment."

Others argue that 11-, 12- and 13-year-olds thrive in the presence of older role models and reminders of concrete goals, like playing varsity sports and getting into college.

"Kids are forward-looking — they don't get nostalgic for second grade when they're in third grade," said Larry Woodbridge, principal of the Secondary School for Law in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where the award-winning high school debate team will teach a middle school social studies unit this spring.

K-8 schools, which prevailed 100 years ago, are the more popular alternative in this debate, cropping up from Philadelphia to Baltimore to Milwaukee to New York. (In New York, which has more than 200,000 sixth- through eighth-grade pupils, most are in traditional 6-8 schools.)

But it is not clear that the shift back into elementary schools makes much of a difference in keeping students from losing their way academically.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that students at Philadelphia's established K-8 schools outperformed students at traditional middle schools, but that those schools had fewer poor and minority students and more experienced teachers, which could have largely explained the results.

In Philadelphia's newer K-8s, which are more similar demographically to the city's middle schools, students performed slightly better than at middle schools, but those advantages were not always statistically significant.

"The bump in student achievement that administrators may achieve in converting to K-8s may not make as big a difference as they would hope for," said Vaughan Byrnes, one of the Johns Hopkins researchers.

The 6th- through 12th-grade school is less common, and less studied. In New York City, where such schools have proliferated — 38 have opened since 2002 — the shift is being driven largely by nonprofit organizations that have helped start new, small schools. These schools are under pressure to show they can produce better results than traditional ones.

In many ways these schools were conceived less as a solution to the middle school problem than as solutions to the high school problem — that is, the problem of having just four years to work magic with woefully underprepared freshmen.

"It's been an amazingly difficult foot race to get kids from where they are coming in at ninth grade to college-ready, and I just wanted more time," said Richard Kahan, president of the Urban Assembly, a city nonprofit group that started creating high schools and has since switched to 6-12 schools, hoping to open three more in September.

Both 6-12 and K-8 schools eliminate one transition from students' lives. Both also tend to have far fewer sixth- through eighth-grade students than the typical middle school — a difference that those who work with middle school students say cannot be underestimated.

"One middle school student is like three high school students in terms of their behavioral needs and the issues you're confronted with," said Fred Walsh, principal of the School for International Studies in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn.

Mr. Walsh said he spent more time dealing with his 170 middle school students, like a sixth-grade boy who recently broke into tears after his science teacher asked him to switch seats, than his 300 high schoolers.

Still, some middle school experts argue that school reconfiguration is a costly distraction from what adolescents really need: smaller classes, an engaging curriculum, personalized attention and well-prepared

teachers. “Creating schools with varying grade configurations, K-8s and 6-12s, will not guarantee that middle-grades teachers and students will be successful,” said Patrick Montesano, who runs a national middle school improvement program at the Academy for Educational Development, a nonprofit organization.

Experts are not the only skeptics. Mr. Woodbridge often finds himself on the defensive among parents terrified to send their fifth graders into the same hallways as high school seniors. And when P.S. 105 was converted from an elementary school into a K-8, some teachers balked at the thought of pubescent preteens in the same school as kindergartners. Indeed, P.S. 105 starts even earlier, with a prekindergarten program.

But many have since come around, sometimes after seeing how their former students return to them for comfort or advice. When a seventh-grader had the shock of getting her first menstrual period during school one day, she turned to her third-grade teacher, Bonnie Petrone, who welcomed her to womanhood in a classroom decorated with snowflakes and smiley faces.

“It’s a comfort zone,” Mrs. Petrone explained.

When a student cut school and left the building last year, his absence was noticed more quickly than it might have been in middle school, and a half-dozen staff members searched the neighborhood and worked the phones before tracking him down at home.

“They know me — my house, my rules,” said Laurie Shapiro, the principal, explaining why such offenses are a rarity.

As for her students, Katty Martinez, 15, relishes being a role model “to the little ones.” Christopher Pike, 8, gets to watch his brother, Marques, 14, play basketball in the school gym.

While the first day of sixth grade can be stomach-churning when a transition to a new school full of strangers is involved, for Kendearia Kingston and Taaliba Chalmers, it was no more traumatic than any other first day of school. The girls, now seventh graders, said their lives were complicated enough without switching schools. “There’s a lot of issues going on,” Kendearia, 12, said.

“Boyfriend issues,” Taaliba, 13, elaborated.

But Cal Lopez, 11, said that being in the same school with prekindergartners made him “feel like a baby.” And Anthony Kuar, a fifth grader, said he was ready to move on from P.S. 105, where crayon renditions of snowmen line a hallway, the principal’s office is packed with Winnie the Pooh knickknacks, and middle school students switch classes — but mostly within one wing of the third floor.

“I want my own locker, with a combination,” Anthony, 11, groused.

At Frederick Douglass Academy, by contrast, the walls are lined with posters of university campuses, photographs of last year’s senior prom, and gold-trimmed sheets of paper listing where each member of the Class of 2006 was admitted to college (the standout: Breeana Moore, who settled on Brown after being admitted to 25 others).

“I can absolutely get all these kids to college if I have them for seven years,” said the principal, Gregory

Hodge. “The school is geared toward one thing: getting your students into college, and it starts in grade six.”

Teachers say students who enter Frederick Douglass as ninth graders, after middle school elsewhere, are often behind academically and chafe at aspects of the school culture, like being called “Mr.” and “Miss” and having to wear navy blue and white uniforms every day.

Antonia Singleton, 18, said the uniform was easy to digest as a sixth grader, because “your mom is still dressing you at that time.” By ninth grade, she said, it was just part of life.

In the cafeteria one recent day, the age chasm was evident. As Kabresha Glover, 11, giggled with her friends over Cheez-its and chicken fingers — “There’s a lot of drama in the sixth grade,” she noted — Jack Boampong, 17, and his friends debated the execution of Saddam Hussein.

While the models differ, in both P.S. 105 and Frederick Douglass, the principals have spent hours orchestrating schedules, staffing and traffic patterns to ensure that contact between their oldest and youngest students is limited, and supervised.

When Frederick Douglass teachers noticed an 11th grade boy and an 8th grade girl holding hands, “We nipped that in the bud,” Dr. Hodge said, adding, “You also have to make sure they emulate the right behavior.”

And so, when a $100,000 college scholarship winner was congratulated on the Frederick Douglass loudspeaker in the middle of John DePasquale’s English class, he briefly stopped his lesson.

“In five years,” he told his seventh-grade charges, “I want to hear your name.”

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