



BETHEL PARK

SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Middle School Model and Other Considerations for Moving 6th Grade to IMS



Quick Recap

- ❑ Feasibility study completed in March of 2021. 6 takeaways drove the analysis.
- ❑ Looking at \$70 - \$100 million in renovation and alteration costs in K-8 in the next 5 years
- ❑ The stakeholder input during the study pointed to several educational opportunities to maximize the investment; middle schools.
- ❑ IMS is under capacity - built for three grades
- ❑ Feasibility study offered 11 options, all of the viable options involve moving 6th grade to IMS.

The Foundations of Middle Schools

In 1966 Donald Eichorn, Upper St. Clair School District Superintendent, wrote the first full book promoting the creation of 6–8 middle schools. The book applied Piaget's theories regarding early adolescent development in designing a suitable educational program. These are key ideas of Eichorn's work:

- Employ active learning strategies to engage students
- Plan for ample interaction with peers (i.e. group work)
- Reduce competitive activities and experiences
- Offer choice in physical education experiences to allow for the range of abilities in physical development
- Offer exploratory and/or self-selected projects or experiences that allow all students to pursue personal interests or develop new interests
- Be flexible with scheduling to allow for extended learning opportunities
- Organize the school into groupings or teams to build camaraderie and sense of belonging
- Create interdisciplinary thematic units that reflected the interrelated nature of different content areas
- Balance traditional academic subjects with cultural studies, physical education, fine arts, and practical arts

Advantages of the Middle School Model

- Relationships are essential. Effective middle level educators understand the **developmental uniqueness of the age group**, the curriculum they teach, and effective learning and assessment strategies.
- **Middle level leaders** understand adolescents, the community, and the theory and practice of middle level education. As the prime determiner of the school culture, the principal influences student achievement and teacher effectiveness by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining an effective instructional program.
- All decisions made about the school are guided by a **shared vision and the core mission** of a middle school to care as much about the well-being of the adolescents as much as we care about their academic success.
- A great middle school is **an inviting, supportive, and safe place**, a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being. In such a school, human relationships are paramount.
- Middle level educators believe in and **nurture the potential of each and every child**. Experiencing such confidence promotes positive attitudes and behaviors and motivates students to tackle challenging learning activities.

Advantages of the Middle School Model cont...

- Students and teachers are engaged in **active learning**. The most successful learning strategies are ones that involve each student personally.
- Academic success and personal growth increase markedly when young adolescents' affective needs are met. All adults in successful middle level schools are **advocates, advisors, and mentors**.
- Successful middle schools **promote family involvement**. The involvement of family is linked to higher levels of student achievement and improved student behavior.
- Great middle schools have **curriculum that is interdisciplinary and exploratory**.
- Since young adolescents learn best through **engagement and interaction**, the best learning strategies involve students in dialogue with teachers and with one another. Teaching approaches should enhance and accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents, and draw upon students' individual learning styles.

Advantages of the Middle School Model cont...

- Authentic, and **appropriate assessment and evaluation measures** provide evidence about every student's learning progress. Grades alone are inadequate expressions for assessing the many goals of middle level education.
- Middle Schools are organized to support meaningful relationships and learning. **Interdisciplinary teams** of teachers work with a common group of students as a building block for a strong learning community with its sense of family, where students and teachers know one another well, feel safe and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks.
- A school that fosters **physical and psychological safety** strives to build resiliency in young people by maintaining an environment in which peaceful and safe interaction are expected and supported by written policies, scheduled professional development, and student-focused activities.
- **Developmentally responsive** middle level schools provide both teachers and specialized professionals who are readily available to offer the assistance many students need in negotiating their lives both in and out of school.

Evidence in Support of Middle Schools

- The eight principles outlined in 1989 by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in *Turning Points* solidified the consensus on the kinds of supportive structures and responsive practices needed by students in the middle grades. It was this **study upon which the foundations of 21st century middle schools are designed**.
- Several large scale and comprehensive studies demonstrate that young adolescents who attend middle schools that use essential programs and practices like interdisciplinary teaming have **higher achievement scores** (Felner, Jackson et al, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993; Mertens, Flowers & Mulhall, 1998).
- Regardless of the grade configuration, **middle schools boost student performance** (Erb, 2006).
- While modest achievement gains may result from changes in school organization—such as team teaching —**major achievement gains** are obtained in schools that have implemented both changes in school organization and in curriculum, instruction, and professional development that assist teachers to foster curiosity, problem solving, and critical thinking for the adolescent student (Hamburg, 2000).

Evidence in Support of Middle School Students

Brain Development:

- This will be the most the brain develops in any period of time other than infancy and requires thoughtfulness on how classroom instruction is conducted.
- The middle school brain's prefrontal cortex is still in the development phase. This part of the brain is responsible for showing empathy and self-awareness.
- Middle level students have a developed emotional brain but have not developed the rational part of the brain.
- Intense need to focus on metacognitive processes (awareness of how you think)

Executive Functioning Skills:

- A set of skills used daily to learn, work, and manage life
- Model and promote self-regulation, sustained attention, task initiation, organization, planning and prioritizing, & time management.

Academic Considerations

- ❖ Maintaining teaming is the structure we are advocating.
- ❖ Teaming begets integration of curriculum, which is strongly supported by educational research.
- ❖ 6th grade is already following a middle school schedule at Neil Armstrong which aligns to the schedule at Independence.
- ❖ All of the music programs at Neil are available and flourishing at Independence.
- ❖ All related arts offerings are available at IMS for the 6th grade with the addition of Family & Consumer Science.
- ❖ Accelerated math courses would be available to sixth grade without bussing students.
- ❖ Independence has a robust remediation program for math and reading.
- ❖ Independence MS maintains enhanced Maker Space and STEAM spaces.

Enhancing the Student Experience

- **Music Program Continuity and Collaboration**
 - With the move to IMS, the Band, Orchestra, and Chorus program could be served by one teacher over the three year period, adding continuity and cohesion during very formative years.
- **Exploratory Days**
 - Each year, the staff at Independence engage in exploratory activities taught by their teachers with activities that are non-traditional or interests of the staff. As an example, teachers conduct sessions on cake decorating, how to use turkey calls, or how to fly drones, to name a few examples.
- **Service Learning Opportunities**
 - IMS Adopts a service project for each team in order to build student's empathy for others situations, helping them look past their egocentrism.
- **Homeroom Advisory Time**
- **Describe Mentoring Programs**
 - Currently available are mentoring programs for our special needs students through SOARE that would be available to 6th graders
 - Mentoring by our NJHS students through the HOTT program to help with academic studies would be available to 6th graders
- **Tier Two Supports Through Academic Assistance as a Part of Some Student's Daily Schedules.**
- **Mental Health Components Available at IMS**
 - Site based mental health therapy
 - Social Work Services
 - Guidance Counseling

Advantages of the Facilities

- ❑ Independence MS is a comprehensive middle school facility with all of the necessary facilities and equipment but is also organized into learning “pods” for each team.
- ❑ In bringing back the 6th grade we are bringing back what was originally intended for IMS and what the building was purposed for as a 6-8 configuration.
- ❑ Facilities are age appropriate in terms of space and size.
- ❑ Proposed renovations will expand the STEAM facilities and improve the flow of movement on team and off team.
- ❑ The updated 6th grade wing will provide familiarity and comfort with peers at their own level of development.
- ❑ 6 of the student’s 9 periods will be within 25 yards of one another and only in possible remediation circumstances will any students have to go upstairs (which will also be within 25 yards but located just above them using the flight of stairs by their pod)
- ❑ Renovations will allow for a much needed overhaul of the digital structures in the building such as wireless connections, interactive flat screens, and the wiring for them that comply with code.

Questions?



Questions that remain

1. What is the projected or recommended timeline?
2. How does this project support the entire feasibility study?
3. What is the plan for transportation and start / end times?
4. What needs to change in the C.B.A. for the move to succeed?
5. What are the implications for staff, particularly the off-team or itinerant staff?
6. What are the additional needs for IMS other than preparing the classrooms?
7. What will we do with the Neil Armstrong library collection? What should move with the 6th grade?