

Study Links Academic Setbacks to Middle School Transition

By Sarah D. Sparks, published online at EdWeek.org

While policymakers and researchers alike have focused on improving students' transition into high school, a new study of Florida schools suggests the critical transition problem may happen years before, when students enter middle school.

The study, part of the Program on Education Policy and Governance Working Papers Series at Harvard University, found that students moving from grade 5 into middle school show a "sharp drop" in math and language arts achievement in the transition year that plagues them as far out as 10th grade, even risking thwarting their ability to graduate from high school and go on to college. Students who make a school transition in 6th grade are absent more often than those who remain in one school through 8th grade, and they are more likely to drop out by 10th grade.

"I don't see eliminating the transition at the high school level as important or beneficial as eliminating the transition at the middle school level," said Martin R. West, an assistant education professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a co-author of the study.

"That to me is a really robust finding," said David L. Hough, the managing editor of the *Middle Grades Research Journal* and a dean emeritus of Missouri State University's college of education, in Springfield. "All these people are focusing on the transition to high school; it looks to me like they need to be focusing on that transition to middle school."

Mr. Hough, who was not involved in the Harvard study, has been developing a database of nearly 2,000 schools covering middle-level grades across 25 states. He said that roughly 6,000 schools nationwide are structured in the K-8 configuration and 8,000 are 6-8. While so-called "elemiddle" K-8 schools had been spreading more rapidly than regular middle schools in recent years, Mr. Hough said district moves to swap middle for elemiddle schools have "leveled off" since 2010.

Losing Their Edge

For the Florida study, Mr. West and Guido Schwerdt, a researcher with the Ifo Institute for Economic Research at the University of Munich in Germany, used the state's longitudinal database to track more than 450,000 students in the state's public schools who proceeded from grades 3 to 10 between 2000-01 and 2008-09.

They found students who attended elementary schools ending at grade 5 had an early edge over those attending K-8 schools in mathematics and language arts, but their performance in both subjects dropped dramatically when they switched to middle school in 6th grade. After the 6th grade transition, middle school students fell by .12 standard deviations in math and .09 standard deviations in reading compared with students at K-8 schools, and then that gap continued to widen throughout middle school and into high school.

Moreover, students who had attended a middle school were 18 percent more likely than students who attended a K-8 school before high school to not enroll in grade 10 after attending grade 9—an indicator that they may have dropped out.

While the middle school drop was most pronounced in urban schools, Mr. West said the same general pattern was repeated in suburban and rural schools.

The Florida findings are "almost identical" to the results of a smaller, 2010 study of New York City public schools, Mr. West said. In it, Columbia University researchers found that students who started in K-5 or K-6 schools performed slightly better than their K-8 peers in math and language arts in 5th grade, but when they moved to a middle school, the K-8 and middle school students changed places, and the achievement gaps between those groups increased through 8th grade.

Mr. Hough has found there is "much popular experience about the shock students experience when first entering middle school from an elementary school, but precious little empirical data have been collected to examine it."

Rather, he said, most researchers and policymakers focus on the transition into high school. In part, that may be because most students who drop out of high school do so in 9th or 10th grades, yet the Florida study found that the transition from middle to high school was much less traumatic for students than the one from elementary to middle school.

Florida students entering high school did see a drop in achievement, but it was temporary and only one-fifth the size of the drop seen during the middle school transition. "For the high school switchers, they suffer a little one-time drop but then recover," Mr. West said. "It looks like a much less disruptive transition than the one to middle school; the high school transition is not that different from what you'd see in a typical school transition."

The onset of puberty can exacerbate normal transition problems for younger students, according to Patti Kinney, an associate director of middle-level services at the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in Reston, Va. "You're looking at students making a transition during a time when tremendous physical, cognitive, and emotional transitions are going on at the same time," Ms. Kinney said. "There's a wide variety of maturation among different children at that level."

In contrast, the Mountain View, Calif., research group EdSource found no difference between K-8 and 6-8 school achievement overall in its 2010 study of middle-grade achievement in California, "Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades," but it did find some schools better than others at helping students transition into middle school, according to Matthew Rosin, an EdSource senior research associate.

"The picture we got was schools that were having higher-achievement outcomes were being more intense and intentional about looking at a wider array of student data [during the middle school transition] and finding out what interventions were needed quickly," Mr. Rosin said.

Easing Transitions

For example, the 1,400-student La Merced Intermediate School, part of the Montebello Unified School District outside Los Angeles, asks the elementary teachers of all incoming 6th graders to fill out academic-history reports, including their previous grades and test scores, problem areas, favorite subjects, and extracurricular activities. "Those sheets allow teachers to go, 'OK, what is the range of our students' interests and how do we get them involved in the activities that really resonate with their interests?'" Mr. Rosin said.

The teachers from the smaller elementary schools that feed into La Merced also accompany their 5th grade students on a site visit to the middle school, to help the students learn the campus layout and prepare for the differences in structure from one grade to the next.

For the Florida study, the researchers used a survey of principals to compare instructional practices at the various schools, but did not find much difference between practices or class sizes at K-8 and 6-8 schools. However, they did find that 6-8 middle schools had more than twice as many students at each grade level, 363, than the 125 students per grade on average at K-8 schools.

That larger grade-level group may make it harder to tailor instruction and ease the moves from grade to grade, Mr. West suggested.

Ms. Kinney of the NASSP said that effective transitions should be "a process, not an event."

"A lot of times, people talk about transition programs, and they are talking about what they are doing in 9th grade, when they really need to be working with their middle schools to support students much earlier," she said.

"Kids develop at their own rates; what's important is how you are personalizing that environment for them," Ms. Kinney said. "The grade configuration in a lot of ways is a secondary consideration."

The NASSP's *Breaking Ranks in the Middlebook* on improving student achievement in middle grades calls for schools serving those grades to provide each student with a "personal adult advocate" to help him or her understand the changing academic requirements and social dynamics.

"It is easy for those who don't work regularly with middle-level students to forget that 6th graders are only five or six years removed from their teddy bears," *Breaking Ranks* notes, and "those who do work with middle-level students sometimes forget that, by the time students leave 'the middle,' the rigors of college are only four short years away."