

## **The Critical Years:**

### **Trying to Find Solutions in Chaotic Middle Schools**

By ELISSA GOOTMAN

Published: January 3, 2007

Sit in with a seventh-grade science class at Seth Low, a cavernous Brooklyn middle school, as paper balls fly and pens are flicked from desk to desk.

A girl is caught with a note and quickly tears it up, blushing, as her classmates chant, “Read it!” The teacher, Laura Lowrie, tries to demonstrate simple machines by pulling from a box a hammer, a pencil sharpener and then, to her instant remorse, a nutcracker — the sight of which sends a cluster of boys into a fit of giggles and anatomical jokes.

“It’s the roughest, toughest, hardest thing to teach,” Ms. Lowrie said of middle school. “I’ll go home and feel disappointed with what’s going on and I’ll try a different tactic the next day.” As for the nutcracker, she sighed, “I should have used a stapler.”

Driven by newly documented slumps in learning, by crime rates and by high dropout rates in high school, educators across New York and the nation are struggling to rethink middle school and how best to teach adolescents at a transitional juncture of self-discovery and hormonal change.

The difficulty of educating this age group is felt even in many wealthy suburban school districts. But it is particularly intense in cities, where the problems that are compounded in middle school are more acute to begin with and where the search for solutions is most urgent.

In Los Angeles, the new superintendent, David L. Brewer III, has vowed to transform middle schools as a top priority, and low-performing schools are experimenting with intensive counseling.

In Philadelphia and Baltimore, school systems are trying to make the middle school problem literally disappear, by folding grades six through eight into K-8 schools. In one Columbia, S.C., school district, all five middle schools have begun offering some form of single-sex classes, on the theory that they promote self-esteem and reduce distractions.

And middle schools across the five boroughs of New York City are experimenting with a grab bag of strategies, from adding special periods dedicated to organizational skills, to reducing the number of teachers that each student has. At the Brooklyn Secondary School for Collaborative Studies, in Carroll Gardens, which includes grades 6 through 12, school does not start until 9 a.m., because the principal, Alyce Barr, believes adolescents are by nature not morning people.

Middle schools, sometimes called intermediate schools, were created starting in the 1960s, after educators determined that seventh-through-ninth-grade junior high schools were excessively rigid and unattuned to adolescents’ personal development. But now, a battery of standardized tests, some required under the No Child Left Behind law, are starkly illustrating that many of these sixth-through-eighth-grade schools are failing, also.

The most recent results of math and reading tests given to students in all 50 states showed that between 1999 and 2004, elementary school students made solid gains in reading and math, while middle school students made smaller gains in math and stagnated in reading.

In New York State, grade-by-grade testing conducted for the first time last year showed that in rich and poor districts alike, reading scores plunge from the fifth to sixth grade, when most students move to middle school, and continue to decline through eighth grade. The pattern is increasingly seen as a critical impediment to tackling early high school dropout rates as well as the achievement gap separating black and white students.

“If you don’t get them hooked into school here, by the time they leave they’re gone.” said Barry M. Fein, the principal of Seth Low.

The troubles transcend test scores. While 74 percent of elementary schools reported at least one violent incident in the 2003-4 school year, 94 percent of middle schools did, federal statistics show.

Mr. Fein spent a recent evening counseling a student who had used a blunt kitchen knife to slash her face and arms: Her wavering self-esteem, it seemed, had ebbed to a low after two friends went out to lunch at McDonald’s without her.

“You handle stuff like that and you go, ‘O.K., now you want me to raise test scores?’ ” he said. “They don’t really think past tomorrow.”

In New York City, almost every kind of experiment is under way. At Intermediate School 211 in Canarsie, students of all grades are grouped into academies with themes like business and cultural arts based on their interests rather than their age. The principal, Buffie Simmons-Peart, confiscates explicit romance novels with airbrushed covers, saying they have a “dumbifying” influence.

I.S. 339, near Claremont Park in the Bronx, is working with Turnaround for Children, a nonprofit group, to focus on the most deeply troubled students, who can have an almost magnetic power over their peers. Nearly every seventh grader has a laptop computer — an excellent antidote, the principal, Jason Levy, has found, to adolescents’ fidgeting and demand for attention.

The city has also been experimenting with grade reconfiguration on a grand scale. Since 2004, the Bloomberg administration has converted 42 elementary schools into K-8 schools and closed 14 traditional middle schools, with plans to close eight more by 2008.

The city has also recently created 38 schools for grades 6-12, another twist on the middle school model. And 44 large middle schools have been carved into “small learning communities,” in which groups of students take their classes together, functioning almost as a school within a school. Andres Alonso, the deputy chancellor for teaching and learning, said the department was also revisiting the way sixth through eighth graders are taught science and noted that it had added \$40 million yearly for struggling middle school students. “The work in the middle schools is extraordinarily important,” Dr. Alonso said.

At Seth Low — also known as I.S. 96 — in the Bensonhurst neighborhood, Mr. Fein is skeptical of the rush for quick answers.

“Nobody’s ever come down and said, ‘This works,’ ” he said, speaking amid an office cluttered with John Lennon memorabilia, congratulatory plaques and student work like a glittery card reading “Mr. Fine, He So Fine.”

Mr. Fein worries about test scores because he has to; although some of his students take a special test to get in, his school is listed as failing under No Child Left Behind because it has narrowly missed

performance targets for special education students, Hispanics and non-native English speakers. But scores are not exactly his priority.

One recent day, Mr. Fein rode in the back of a police car to a building where a runaway student was hiding out. He climbed to the sixth floor, where he found her, dried her tears and, when she was ready, escorted her down.

Another day, he spent hours arguing with superiors who insisted that a suspended student serve her time at a school in Park Slope, which the principal feared was so far away that the girl would never show up.

Still, Mr. Fein, 58, a former teacher who could have retired three years ago, sticks with it. To cope, he has taken to spending a few predawn minutes meditating in his office, to the glow of candles and a lava lamp.

Students also have to find ways to cope. For sixth graders like Atticus Rollins, 12, a video game and science fiction aficionado, the adjustment to middle school has been a strange mix of empowering and emasculating.

He likes being able to “walk wherever you want in the hallways” without having to follow a teacher in a straight line. Still, he said: “It feels like you’re in kindergarten again, because you’re the youngest group of all. There are the tall eighth graders, they’re like skyscrapers, you have to look up to them.” For Raechelle Ellison, 11, transition was marked by tears, nightly pleadings to her mother that she did not want to return and the composition of poetry with verses like, “Life in despair/I don’t really care.” “Being in middle school is just like a bird being kicked out of its nest by its mother,” Raechelle mused in the cafeteria one recent morning.

At Raechelle’s old school, nearly everyone was black, like her; at Seth Low, which has a mix of black, white, Asian and Hispanic students, she was initially the only black person in her class.

Last year, the private preK-8 school she attended was “way smaller,” and she spent most of the day in one classroom, with a single teacher. This year she shuffles from room to room, and it has taken her 10 teachers longer to figure out that her name is neither Rachel nor Rochelle but a unique blend of the two.

Raechelle, with her earnest reflections and pigtails, seems a world away from the eighth graders who rush into the cafeteria two periods later.

Robert Combs, 14, whose mind has already turned to high school and the eighth grade prom, listened to 50 Cent on his iPod. Nazli Sevuk, 14, sported a glittering ring from her boyfriend. Kimberly Basic, 13, with long, dark hair and snug jeans, plotted with friends about what to wear and how to meet up for a night out at a nearby nightclub’s under-18 party; she can no longer be bothered with eighth grade boys.

Middle school teachers point to the gulf between the smooth-skinned sixth grade “babies” and these eighth-graders on the verge of adulthood, and note how they must guide these students through the profound transformations of adolescence.

“These kids go through more change in their lives than at any other time except the first three years,” said Sue Swaim, executive director of the National Middle School Association.

The Seth Low seventh graders have their own theories about why middle school scores plummet. Nadine George, 12, said she is struggling in science class now because she never understood it in elementary school, despite getting good grades on tests. “Not that I knew how to do it, but whatever was in my notes I just copied it down,” she cheerily elaborated.

George Coronado, 13, said he was distracted now by fights and girls, who were starting to “look mad good.” Fabiola Noel, 12, disclosed that during a recent math class, her mind wandered to the look of her hair. In the note that was torn up in science class, Lillian Safa, 13, had asked a friend why a third girl was ignoring her. Two weeks later, Lillian reported, they are once again friends.

### **Taking Middle Schoolers Out of the Middle**

By [ELISSA GOOTMAN](#)

Published: January 22, 2007

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.”

### **For Teachers, Middle School Is Test of Wills**

Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Corinne Kaufman, a math teacher at Seth Low Intermediate School in Brooklyn, has spent 17 years working with middle school students, learning how to turn insults into teaching moments and head off fights.

When a student at Seth Low Intermediate School loudly pronounced Corinne Kaufman a “fat lady” during a fire drill one recent day, Mrs. Kaufman, a 45-year-old math teacher, calmly turned around. “Voluptuous,” she retorted, then proceeded to define the unfamiliar term, cutting off the laughter and offering a memorable vocabulary lesson in the process.

Such are the survival skills Mrs. Kaufman has acquired over 17 years at Seth Low, a large middle school in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn: How to snuff out brewing fistfights before the first punch is thrown, how to coax adolescents crippled by low self-esteem into raising their hands, how to turn every curveball, even the biting insult, into a teachable moment.

But not all middle school teachers can do it.

Faced with increasingly well-documented slumps in learning at a critical age, educators in New York and across the nation are struggling to rethink middle school, particularly in cities, where the challenges of adolescent volatility, spiking violence and lagging academic performance are more acute.

As they do so, they are running up against a key problem: a teaching corps marked by high turnover, and often lacking expertise in both subject matter and the topography of the adolescent mind.

The demands of teaching middle school show up in teacher retention rates. In New York City, the nation's largest school system, middle school teachers account for 22 percent of the 41,291 teachers who have left the school system since 1999 even though they make up only 17 percent of the overall teaching force, according to the United Federation of Teachers.

In Philadelphia, researchers found that 34.2 percent of new middle school teachers in one representative year quit after their first year, compared with 21.1 percent of elementary school teachers and 26.3 percent of high school teachers.

“There was a lot more anger and outbursts,” Christian Clarke, 29, a Bronx high school teacher, recalled of the students he encountered during his four years teaching middle school. “Twice as much time was spent on putting out fires; twice as much time was spent getting the class quiet. Twice as much time was spent on defusing anger in the kids.”

A good middle school teacher needs to know how to channel such anger into class work, and whether inappropriate questions like “Are you gay?” (as a Seth Low student recently asked her math teacher) merit serious discussion or feigned deafness.

“You have to have a huge sense of humor and a small ego,” said Jason Levy, the principal of Intermediate School 339 in the Bronx. “There are some people who are born to do it and some who learn to do it, and there are some people who really shouldn't do it.”

Yet the preparation for these jobs is often inadequate.

The Education Trust, a Washington-based advocacy group, has asserted that a “scandalously high” number of middle school classes are taught by teachers lacking even a college minor in their assigned subjects.

Around the country, middle school teachers are often trained as elementary school generalists or as high school subject specialists, with little understanding of young adolescent psychology.

“We're really in a malpractice kind of environment, where we're preparing teachers for elementary classrooms and high school classrooms but not middle-grades classrooms,” said Peggy Gaskill, research chairwoman of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, an alliance of educators, researchers and others seeking to improve middle school education.

Dr. Gaskill has found that while 46 states offer some sort of credential specifically for middle school teachers, only 24 require it.

States and school districts looking to strengthen their teachers are trying a variety of approaches, among them offering special certifications for middle school teachers, paying them extra to work in tough schools, or having them cover two subjects instead of one to let them develop closer relationships with students.

Three years ago, New York State began offering a special middle school certification for fifth through ninth grade, for teachers whose training emphasizes young adolescent pedagogy and development.

But it is not mandatory to teach in middle school, and so far, few have pursued it. Of New York City's 13,296 middle school teachers, only 82 are certified as “middle school generalists.” Some policy



makers fear that stricter credentialing requirements could further narrow the pool of potential middle school teachers.

Part of the challenge of middle school is the breathtaking range of student ability, more pronounced than in elementary schools, where one can only fall so far behind, or high schools, which generally offer tracked classes.

The most difficult high school students often drop out or skip class, while middle school teachers tend to face a full house.

“Problematic kids in high school don’t come to school anymore, but in middle school they still show up,” said Barry M. Fein, the principal of Seth Low. “I think that piece alone makes it more challenging.”

The challenges surface in test scores. In grade-by-grade testing conducted across New York State for the first time last year, reading scores plunged from fifth to sixth grade, when most students move to middle school, and continued to slide through eighth grade.

The most recent results of math and reading tests given to students in all 50 states showed that between 1999 and 2004, elementary school students made solid gains in reading and math, while middle school students made smaller gains in math and stagnated in reading.

Yet many middle school teachers land there by happenstance. “More people end up in middle schools because that’s where the openings are,” said Carmen Fariña, a former deputy chancellor of the New York City school system who is now helping 35 middle school principals reshape their schools. “It’s not necessarily a choice.”

JoAnn Rintel Abreu, 40, an English and social studies teacher at Seth Low, graduated with a masters’ degree in English literature, the “bare minimum” teaching requirements and glorious visions of turning high school students on to Shakespeare and Chaucer. She was offered a middle school job first.

Now, after 16 years at Seth Low, Mrs. Abreu takes great satisfaction in trying to figure out how to reach adolescents. The rewards come with breakthrough moments, like when a sullen eighth grader who rarely does his homework handed in a bitterly descriptive, beautifully written memoir about his father’s new girlfriend, “the witch.”

“Middle school is like Scotch,” she reflected in the teachers’ lounge one afternoon. “At first you try to get it down. Then you get used to it. Then it’s all you order.”

Among her colleagues, Mrs. Kaufman, who taught the impromptu lesson on the word “voluptuous,” started off as a third-grade teacher but moved on to middle school after a year spent blowing too many noses and zipping up too many jackets. Ben Bass, 59, started teaching middle school math only after losing his elementary school position during the teacher layoffs of the 1970s.

Near Claremont Park in the Bronx, Mr. Levy, the principal of I.S. 339, has worked hard to cobble together a staff capable of helping him revive a school mired in years of failure.

“Just go to a job fair,” he said. “The lines for elementary school and high school are around the corner. We can’t get people to teach in middle schools.”

One of his solutions has been to rely heavily on Teach for America. Twenty-one of his teachers, nearly a third, are part of the program, which recruits recent college graduates. While such teachers are often well-educated and energetic, many leave after their two-year commitments.

One of Mr. Levy's most popular teachers is Leila Siddiky, 23, a Teach for America participant who was told during her training that she should work hard not to come across as a friend to her students, or let details of her personal life seep into lessons. It was advice she never took seriously.

"I would let it go in one ear and out the other," she said. "I was like, that's not going to work with me."

Instead, she has brought her students leftover cake from her birthday party and spiced up lessons on immigration with tales of her own family's journey from Bangladesh, on the theory that "the key is to get the kids to like you."

A colleague, Eli Savit, 23, took his training to heart, starting last year off being "very strict."

"It's basically this broken windows theory that if you let things slide, there's going to be complete chaos," he said. "But it just falls flat."

Later, Mr. Savit let down his guard and started playing basketball with some of his more problematic students. After that, he noticed, they softened.

At I.S. 339, there is very little ability-based tracking, as Mr. Levy feels it leads to a "dumping-ground mentality."

The downside is evident in one of Matt Tepper's seventh-grade English classes; one student responded to an assignment to write a memoir with a vivid, smoothly relayed narrative of being in a car accident, while another handed in an ungrammatical account of a dog's illness.

"I'm writing about one day my dog got sick," the student wrote. "This a moment that never I going to lost. Because my dog it like my baby okay."

Questioned after lunch one winter day, students were in agreement: While Ms. Siddiky may be "mad cool," the job of a middle school teacher is not to be envied.

"The kids is too much trouble," said Joshlyn Rosado, 13.

"There's no consequences for them," added Tashima Jackson, 13.

"There's always arguments," Candice Moore, 14, chipped in before heading off to class. "It's always something."