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Middle School Concept Is Best Model

A note from the Portsmouth School Board on the Middle School.

(Editor's note: The following was submitted by the Portsmouth School Board).

As the Portsmouth School Department moves forward on the question of the middle school, we feel it is important to explain our thinking to the community and address some issues that have been raised concerning grade configuration and the "middle school concept." The Portsmouth Middle School has housed grades six, seven, and eight in one building since 1991. The School Board approved this concept 15 years ago and has reaffirmed its position several times since. Before that, various grade configurations were used, driven largely by the scarcity of space and the exploding student numbers due to the growth at Pease Air Force Base.

When the current school was built in 1930, "Portsmouth Junior High School" was carved in the granite above the front door. Seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders attended the new state-of-the-art junior high school with its 700-seat auditorium. (The auditorium was demolished in 1978 along with some irreplaceable WPA (Works Progress Administration) murals). It was common in those days to have seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders together in one building and have it run as a "junior" or mini-version of a high school. This is distinctly different from how we think about elementary education, where generally one teacher in one classroom with one set of students teaches all subjects. It was not uncommon, in the early to mid-1900s, for many students to never go on to high school. It was often necessary for them to work in order to help support their families. Education was not as high a priority -- or necessity -- as it is today.

When Portsmouth High School opened on Alumni Drive in the 1950s, the ninth-graders moved into the building. Then in 1961, overcrowding forced ninth-grade students back into the PJHS while the high school added another floor. Pease had opened, increasing class sizes across all grades. This "junior" high school notion of schooling continued well into the 1960s. In 1973, the crowding problem shifted to the junior high, where there were 30 to 40 students in a math class. Two hundred students were housed in the Whipple School, going to PJHS for specials such as physical education and art. By the mid-'70s, however, educators began thinking more about the developmental needs of early adolescents. With that came a different way of looking at how we educate our middle grade students, one that looked at incorporating sixth-graders into the mix rather than ninth-graders.

Much of the research at the heart of the emergence of the middle school concept is based on the recognition that this is a special age of human growth and development, a time when children need different kinds of instruction, support and opportunities in order to learn and to grow. There have been about 3,700 studies related to middle schools published between 1991 and 2003. Out of these and earlier studies, a set of sound educational principles and practices generally known as the "middle school concept" emerged. These include student engagement, improved relationships between teachers and students, small collaborative teaching teams, and an integrated curriculum. Many of the founding principles of the middle school concept could be, and are, applied to all grade levels. They are simply good, sound educational practices.

The standout feature of the middle school concept is the division of the student population into teams, what educators would call "small interdisciplinary learning communities."

"Teams" are a foundation of the middle school concept that help create a more nurturing atmosphere for our youngsters going through the very difficult path of early adolescence. Physical

development is significant, and an adolescent's emotional state is changing. Self-esteem is often in question as a youngster's hormones are in flux.

This middle school team approach allows teachers to more closely "follow the child," i.e., develop stronger ties with individual students and therefore better able to monitor their progress and offer quick feedback and assistance. The students identify with their team and develop the sense of belonging and ownership that research has found was lacking in the traditional seven-period, seven different teachers, revolving schedule that was typical of junior high schools.

The strength of the middle school team approach is that it turns a large school into smaller communities, which in turn allows students and teachers to establish the stronger connections that research suggests is critical to academic success in this age group.

We are fortunate in Portsmouth to have a seasoned administrator with more than 30 years of experience educating middle school age children.

John Stokel began teaching at Portsmouth Junior High School in 1974, and became principal in 1981. He remembers, from both perspectives, just how unconnected the students' education was.

At that time, the school was seventh and eighth grades only. It was under his urging and leadership that Portsmouth became a middle school in 1991.

We believe that students, parents, teachers and staff do not develop a sense of belonging, ownership or dedication in a school that only has two grades. They spend the first year adjusting and the second year leaving. There is no sense of quiet and peace that allows the adolescent mind to settle and focus in order to learn.

The "middle school concept" works well in Portsmouth. Having three grades (six, seven, and eight) together in one building, working in teams of students and teachers with a core curriculum, has been an effective and successful strategy for our kids.

As we move forward to either renovate or build new construction for our middle school, the School Board is committed to maintaining open communication with the community.

It is in this spirit that we have explained our thinking and the thinking of our educators to maintain the current grade configuration and work to ensure that our students receive the best possible environment to grow academically, socially and emotionally.