

## Academic research overwhelmingly finds that 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are better off staying in elementary school

### Academic Research

Academic institutions such as Duke University, Columbia University, Harvard University, University of California and others have all produced independent empirical research examining the impact of grade configuration on student achievement. These studies have found that moving 6<sup>th</sup> graders to middle school results in overall poorer outcomes for the students. When asked, these researchers were unable to point to credible research to the contrary. As one researcher told a LO United member, *I don't have an ideological axe to grind, I just studied the data.*

### National Middle School Association

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) is an advocacy organization whose mandate is to support and improve the middle schools experience. Their membership represents middle school teachers and administrators. The NMSA has authored their own papers on best practices for middle schools. The NMSA takes the position that grade configuration is irrelevant and that how students are taught is all that matters, this view is not corroborated by academic research.

### Key Points:

- Academic researchers find 6th graders at middle schools perform worse on tests and experience more behavioral and self-esteem problems when compared to 6th graders in elementary school
- Academic researchers believe the earlier the transition to middle school the greater impact it has on the children (ie moving children in 6<sup>th</sup> grade is worse than moving them in 7<sup>th</sup> grade)
- A few researchers believe that some of the negative impacts of moving 6<sup>th</sup> graders to middle school can be minimized by investing heavily in the new program – unfortunately, LOSD does not have extra funds to invest, this is a cost-cutting initiative.
- Many studies have focused on K-8 model as a better alternative to a middle school configuration.
- There has been a national trend away from the middle school model over the last several years.
- Concerned parents in other districts have successfully fought to keep their 6<sup>th</sup> graders in elementary. Read this interesting article: [http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s\\_573720.html](http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_573720.html)

### Factors Favoring Sixth Grade in Elementary School<sup>1</sup>

- **Sixth graders in middle school have more behavioral problems than their peers in elementary school.** In a highly-regarded 2007 study of public school students in North Carolina, a group at Duke University's Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy looked at behavior to evaluate whether sixth graders were better off in elementary school or middle school. After appropriate adjustments for socioeconomic and demographic factors, the study showed that sixth graders attending elementary school were less likely to have discipline problems than their middle school counterparts. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Public School Review, "Should Sixth Grade Be in Elementary School or Middle School?" March 30, 2008.

the discrepancy in discipline problems continued through the eighth and ninth grades. Studies have shown that disciplinary problems correspond with low academic achievement.

- **Sixth graders in elementary school test higher than those in middle school.** The Duke study also considered test scores. The researchers found that sixth graders in elementary school scored higher than their peers in middle school on standardized end-of-grade tests. A recent study in the Philadelphia the school system concurred with the Duke study. According to school superintendent Paul Vallas, the study showed that sixth graders in elementary schools perform better on standardized tests than those in middle schools. In response, Philadelphia is reducing the number of middle schools from 46 to eight and placing the sixth graders in elementary schools.
- **Sixth graders in middle school are exposed to older teens which may have a negative influence on them.** Children in the sixth grade are at a point in their lives when they are easily influenced by their peers. Keeping the sixth graders in elementary school gives them another year to mature before they are exposed to older adolescents
- **Middle schools are usually larger than elementary schools.** Rightly or wrongly, middle schools have reputation of seeming large, uninviting, and impersonal. Middle schools have been referred to as the lost stepchildren of the education system. Many parents and teachers believe that sixth graders do better in a smaller, more nurturing setting where there are fewer classmates and more one-on-one contact with the teacher.
- **Middle schools tend to be located tend further away from home than elementary schools.** Probably because there are fewer middle schools than elementary schools, many parents find that the middle school is further away from home than the elementary school. They do not like the idea of their sixth graders being so far away. They also question whether a longer commute is appropriate for sixth graders.