



## Negative Effects of Grouping Sixth Graders with Older Students

Writer: Duke University <http://today.duke.edu/>

Durham, NC - Sixth graders placed in middle schools have more discipline problems and lower test scores than their peers who attend elementary schools, according to a study by researchers at Duke University and the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, the negative effects of grouping sixth graders with older students are lasting and persist at least through ninth grade.

"These findings cast serious doubt on the wisdom of the historic nationwide shift to the grades 6-8 middle school format," said Philip Cook, Duke professor of public policy and economics and an author of the paper. In the 1970s, less than 25 percent of middle schools included sixth grade. Now, the figure is 75 percent nationwide and 90 percent in North Carolina, which has led the trend toward grades 6-8 middle schools. The shift took place in part due to school population pressures, but also because educators believed it was developmentally appropriate.



"What's been lacking in the debate is any real data on how the school configuration affects student behavior and performance," Cook said. "As it turns out, moving sixth grade out of elementary school appears to have had substantial costs."

Jacob Vigdor and Clara Muschkin, Cook's colleagues at Duke's Sanford Institute of Public Policy, and Robert MacCoun of UC Berkeley co-authored the report, "Should Sixth Grade Be in Elementary or Middle School? An Analysis of Grade Configuration and Student Behavior." The report is available online as a Sanford Institute working paper at [www.pubpol.duke.edu/research/papers/](http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/research/papers/).

The researchers contrasted sixth graders attending North Carolina's grade 6-8 middle schools with those attending grade K-6 elementary schools. The data pertained to 44,709 sixth-graders in 243 schools in 99 districts. The sixth graders attending middle school were more than twice as likely to be disciplined as those attending elementary school, after accounting for socioeconomic and demographic differences in the groups. Drug-related disciplinary incidents were nearly four times greater among the middle school group. The pattern continued as the sixth graders advanced through the grades, suggesting the problems were not tied solely to the transition to a new school environment.

In addition, sixth graders in elementary schools improved their scores on end-of-grade exams in math and reading relative to their peers in middle schools, and those gains persisted through ninth grade. Although the study didn't pinpoint the causes for the differences, the authors concluded that the 6-8 middle school structure brought impressionable sixth graders into routine contact with older adolescents who were a bad influence. Older adolescents are more rebellious and more involved in delinquency, sex, illicit drugs and other activities that violate school rules, the authors noted. "This points to a general pattern whereby it is better for kids to make transitions later rather than earlier," said Vigdor, a co-author. "Sixth grade is an especially vulnerable time, in the sense that sixth graders display a strong susceptibility to peer influence and the decision to expose them to slightly older or slightly younger students seems to have a lasting impact."



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