The Cultural Contradictions of Middle Schooling for Rural Community Survival

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Middle schools have been growing in popularity since the 1960s, and they are the only school type in the U.S. actually to have increased in number during the past 2 decades. Demographic changes, redistricting pressures related to desegregation, and economies of scale rationales are probable causes behind the middle school movement. Educational leaders who advocate such schools, however, claim that middle schools have come into being because their instructional practices are better suited to the developmental needs of children. We argue, conversely, that school reform in America historically has had little to do with the developmental needs of children. Middle schools in both urban and rural places are attractive mostly for administrative, not pedagogical, reasons. Further, since the construction of middle schools in many rural places often involves closing local elementary schools, the middle school concept does violence to communitarian precepts. In short, the middle school movement can be a real threat to citizens of many small towns, especially where their small elementary or high schools remain otherwise viable centers of community life.

Today, it is clear that the middle school has moved into the organizational mainstream and is likely to continue to dominate intermediate education as educators prepare for the twenty-first century. As of the early 1990s, a body of literature, associations, conferences, and legislation all are emerging to promote the middle school concept and philosophy. (Wiles & Bondi, 1993, p. vii)

Many educators welcome the announcement that middle-grade schooling has, once again, moved from being "subject-centered" to "learner-centered." Available data on contemporary school organization in the U.S. show that middle schools indeed are popular organizational forms. Between 1968 and 1991, middle schools were the only school type to increase in number. In fact, the number of identified middle schools grew by over 400% during this era: from 2,080 to 8,545 (NCES, 1992). Meanwhile, the total number of U.S. schools declined from 94,197 to 81,746, and the number of elementary and junior high schools—from which the middle school grades were gathered—declined, respectively, from 67,186 to 59,015 and from 7,437 to 4,561 (NCES, 1992).

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The middle school phenomenon is no illusion so far as the designation of buildings is concerned. Proponents of middle schools, however, claim that the discovery of special developmental requirements of early adolescence underlies the reorganization of schooling for preadolescents:

This time is of immense importance in the development of the young person. Biologically, young adolescents experience puberty, a period of growth and development more rapid than in any other phase of life except infancy. Over four or five years, dramatic changes occur in height, weight, and body composition, and young people acquire the capacity to reproduce. Youth enter puberty at a significantly younger age today than in previous generations. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 21)

Middle school advocates argue that the lack of an institution designed to take specific account of such characteristics seriously handicapped the instruction of preadolescents in an earlier era:

Preadolescence is a restless age for girls and boys. The torture of trying to sit still in school is obvious, and some pupils learn to perform remarkable feats of contortion without falling out of their

chairs. Therefore, a school atmosphere in which physical movement is integral to the educative process is of high priority for the preadolescent. Activity-related learning (for example drawing, designing, constructing, and making displays), as well as moving from classroom to library or from classroom to play center, is vital to the preadolescent. In other words, a steady grind at the school desk is undesirable at this restless age. (Wiles & Bondi, 1993, p. 35)

On the other hand, such attributions pertain to the classroom situation of many older and younger children, and it is equally true that most adults tire of a "steady grind" at work or at school.

Moreover, proponents of middle schools typically overlook existing linkages between schools and their social and cultural contexts. We take this latter concern most seriously in this article. In the following pages, we review evidence challenging the view that the success of the middle school movement can primarily be attributed to a better understanding of learner needs. Further, we argue that theories of personal and psychological development can be harmful for many elementary schools in rural places, and that the middle school movement can further the erosion of rural communities in the U.S. We specifically challenge the developmentalist logic propounded by most middle school advocates. We argue that calls for new structures designed for preadolescents underestimate the social significance of the school for their surrounding communities, particularly those in rural America. Calls for middle schools, in fact, have been used as yet another strategy for rural school consolidation.

Misunderstanding the Organization of Instruction

The middle school movement is clearly a vital feature of school reform in the late 20th century, although its future is less secure than its advocates may wish (Cuban, 1993). Further, as rural scholars have taken great pains to underscore, rural schools have typically served community interests beyond those associated with classroom pedagogy (DeYoung, 1995; Peshkin, 1978; Tyack, 1974). Many of us who wish to preserve and restore schools as community centers thus need to contest the logic of the middle school movement.

Middle school advocates often exhibit a weak understanding of the history of this organizational form and appear poorly placed to predict its future. Proponents assume two positions that relegate social and historical considerations to the background. First, they believe that school reform is, and ought to be, driven by advances in the scientific understanding of the nature of childhood (e.g., "transescence"). Second, they believe that schools should

implement instructional objectives posed by the nature and interests of the learners themselves (Kliebard, 1986). Middle schooling puts the presumed prerogative of child development ahead of social, cultural, and historical priorities. It heralds a kind of pedagogical practice in which child development per se tends to become the curriculum, to the detriment of community, social, and intellectual substance (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995). Such a curriculum reinforces the narcissistic tendencies of the national culture (e.g., Lasch, 1991).

History, unfortunately, confirms that compulsory schooling seldom has operated to nurture the personal fulfillment and satisfaction of young people. Rather, the cognitive and behavioral sciences, as they concern educational practice, usually are called upon to improve institutional means (Papagiannis, Klees, & Bickel, 1982; Katz, 1971). In contrast, consideration of the desirable goals of education are value judgments outside the proper realm of positive science. Aims of education devolve to the value judgments of politicians and highly placed bureaucrats, and not principally to citizens (Kamii, Clark, & Dominick, 1994; cf. Kemmis, 1990).

The operant aims of mass schooling—arguably pioneered in the U.S.—concern the development in individuals of rather narrowly defined behaviors and technical capacities congruent with the social and occupational needs of the national culture (Meyer, Benavot, Kamens, Cha, & Wong, 1992). Especially when couched in the language of academic rigor, contemporary school reform has a clear anti-intellectual regimen in view (Howley et al., 1995). Such issues appear obscure to middle school advocates, whose blindness arises precisely because they seriously miscalculate the social context of their work. Wiles and Bondi (1993, p. 1), for example, exhibit such a misunderstanding when they claim "a successful middle school depends more on faculties than on facilities, more on people than on the purse."

Below, we submit that the reverse is true with respect to the status of rural American communities. In these places, facilities and purses attendant to the construction of middle schools often have devastating effects. Any of us might wish circumstances were otherwise, but to pretend otherwise serves both individuals and communities poorly, as our analysis will suggest.

Capturing a Historical Dimension

The general problem of untangling the purpose and direction of school reform in the U.S. is thoughtfully considered by Kliebard (1986), who describes American school reform efforts during much of the 20th century as a continuing struggle over the means and ends of schooling. The four world views that join this struggle, Kliebard claims, are those of the humanists, developmentalists,

social efficiency advocates, and social meliorists. Although Kliebard's analysis centers on competing curricular perspectives between 1896 and 1953, similar forces compel the contending perspectives at work today within school reform movements (Howley et al., 1995).

Humanists

In preceding centuries, formal education beyond the rudiments reflected the aspirations of the landed gentry, and schooling was intended to develop among them an appreciation of classical works in a Christian context. Advocates for school reform who derive their principal commitments 'from this source are termed humanists by Kliebard. Their influence began to wane early in this century, under the assault of scientific, economic, and social concerns related to the expansion of capitalist economies and industrial operations. Among those who claim contemporary allegiance to this view are conservative critics of schooling such as Ed Hirsch and former Secretary of Education William Bennett (e.g., Bennett, 1988). (Also see Moretti, 1993, for an insightful critique of the conservative misconstruction of liberal learning and the classics.)

Developmentalists

Late 19th-century humanists were attacked as outmoded by both the developmentalists and by those who saw the role of schools as critical to developing students as resources for the economic and institutional progress of society. While internal disputes among developmentalists were important, they all agreed that whatever passed for education had to have its origin within the mind and experience of the child. Education should not be imposed from without, for all people experience stages of mental, physiological, and psychological development that determine when, what, and how they can learn most efficiently. Like today's middle school spokespersons, the early developmentalists presented evidence for such views based on advances in the scientific study of children and their "needs." Today's middle school advocates make the same developmentalist arguments for restructuring adolescent learning environments as their early 20th-century counterparts did for establishing graded elementary schools and junior high schools in the era of World War I.

Social Efficiency Advocates

On the other hand, social efficiency advocates claimed to be more pragmatic in their educational concerns and insisted that schools ought not be created for the good of the child, but for the good of a changing and economically diversifying economic and social structure. Investments in

public schooling needed to have an eye on the payoff for society, and whatever was taught in the public school should be founded on vocational and social utility. And, they insisted, whatever was taught must be taught cheaply and learned thoroughly. Today, "outcomes-based" education reflects the social efficiency tradition (e.g., Smith, 1994), and has reemerged as dominant in the era of human capital formation and increasing school accountability efforts.

Social Meliorists

Social meliorists believed that improving the social condition of children born to poverty and neglect ought to be the primary focus of public schools. And they believed that public schools should be the agency to address the social problems of the day. Social meliorists argued that (a) humanists were too tied to the past; (b) developmentalism might elucidate some educational means, but had nothing to say about the proper aims of schooling; and (c) social efficiency advocates would primarily enhance the mindless economic development trajectories of a culture losing touch with human and community needs.

Schools for Preadolescents in the 20th Century

Kliebard's analysis of American school reform earlier this century tells us little about the middle school per se. His work focuses primarily on the secondary school, and he ends his historical account before "middle schools" emerged.

Kliebard's key point remains valid nonetheless: Contradictory commitments to contending ideologies make the dynamics of school reform complex. Initiatives launched under the officially sanctioned banners of school improvement—e.g., "systemic reform"—nearly always evoke contending ideological commitments, which can easily distract official efforts (as in the case, we believe, of outcomes-based education). Significant educational reform ensues, Kliebard argues, only when contending parties find common ground or a larger cultural issue that demands an institutional response that can incorporate parts of the agendas of all parties. Both the process and agreements of significant reform, then, are inherently contradictory.

In the current era, unfortunately, school reform for its own sake seems to have become an obsession. The public may now be inured to the idea that ceaseless educational innovation is normal. For those of us who deal with rural schools and rural education, however, the continuing infatuation with school improvement and school reform presents, at best, ambiguous opportunities and, at worst, an outright threat to the public good. We witness officially instigated school improvement efforts that transform the very meaning of schooling in the eyes of the communities that we know. Sometimes this transformation is little

understood and little welcomed, as, for example, the case of school consolidation (DeYoung, 1995; Peshkin, 1982; Sher, 1977).

Before turning more specifically to the cultural contradictions of middle schooling for struggling rural communities, we first review weaknesses in the logic and rhetoric of middle schooling in its own right.

Junior High Schools: Precursors of the Middle School

The fact that there are and always have been competing perspectives for the ends of schooling belies all claims that the dominion of middle schools is in any way inevitable. We should also note that the alleged torture of having to sit through instructional periods dominated by teachers is reported not only by preadolescents, but also by younger and older children and by graduate students of our acquaintance.

Formal schooling never has been designed by adults primarily for the benefit of children, as the children themselves would define it. Indeed, such schooling would be extremely unwise. Even John Dewey, understood by many as the quintessential developmentalist, recognized the extreme irresponsibility of putting children in charge of their own curriculum (Cremin, 1961). Given the choice, he suggested, few if any children would come to any institution that adults called "school." And this observation is as true now as it was in his day. The fundamental assumptions of at least some developmentalists need to be challenged on this basis alone.

This much aside, advocates for a distinct formal level between the elementary and high school have been around since the early 1900s. However, both the ideological underpinnings and formal control of such institutions has changed throughout this century. Most American high schools inherited the academic and college-prep orientation of earlier private academies shortly after the turn of the 20th century (Cuban, 1993). Meanwhile, common schools continued their tradition of teaching English and emphasizing Protestant character traits, as waves of newcomers arrived in our cities (Perkinson, 1991).

In the first several decades of the 20th century, a new type of school began to form in our cities: junior high schools. Their advocates believed that social adjustment and rudimentary training in occupational skills were important aims of schooling that had been neglected in the common schools as well as in the high schools (Cuban, 1993). These dynamics characterized an age when high school completion was still uncommon, of course.

Junior high schools, like the common schools, were urban efforts to create institutions initially responsive to urban children who were handicapped, by custom or prejudice, in their efforts to realize the American dream of social mobility and economic advancement (Perkinson,

1991). At this time, the link between junior high schools and available local occupations was much weaker in rural places. The farmwork of the day was rooted in the skills and commitments of the household economy; thus, separate junior highs in the countryside were much rarer than they were in the city, and the formal education of preadolescents took place in elementary schools or in town high schools until the 1950s.

By the 1930s and 1940s, both junior high schools and senior high schools had become terminal institutions as qualification for workforce entry began to require secondary schooling of some sort for youth not aspiring to college. According to Kliebard (1986), industrial and vocational agriculture programs were primary reasons for the dramatic increase in secondary school enrollments during this era, even if students often left secondary schools once they secured favorable employment. By 1960, however, secondary school completion had become the national norm (Trow, 1961).

Part of the ostensible success of high schools in graduating increasing numbers of students specifically involved the transformation of the junior high school. Faced with mounting pressure to graduate their students, senior high principals and superintendents had transformed the junior high curriculum between the 1920s and 1960s to deliver academic preparation for high school entrance and completion. As we noted earlier, this instrumentality had not constituted the initial pedagogical aim of junior high schools (Cuban, 1993).

Developmentalism and the Middle School?

The 1960s saw a reawakening of interest in the developmental needs of middle adolescence (Coleman, 1974; Beane, 1990). Today, advocates of middle schooling invariably explain the importance of this model in developmental terms, arguing that the special circumstances and needs of young adolescence require more opportunity for maturation and growth than characterizes the elementary school, but less rigor and competition than characterizes the high school. As suggested earlier, such claims are typically defended with reference to advances in psychological research, research with which advocates attempt to warrant a new organizational form:

> [I]n the early 1960s the forces of human development research were pushing American education closer to a reformation of both the purpose and structure of schooling. Of particular influence were the translations of Jean Piaget's work, a major study of human development from ten to fourteen by the University of California at Berkeley, and the first efforts to integrate this nation's schools.

By 1965, the United States was "primed" for the invention of a number of new educational programs including early childhood education, middle school education, gifted education, and special education. All of these new programs shared the common denominator of being focused on human growth and development, and collectively they ushered in a new era of American education. (Wiles & Bondi, 1993, p. 4)

While it sounds good to say that new eras of American education are the result of systematic scientific inquiry and advances in developmental psychology, this claim simply is not true. Rather, the changing social, economic, and political circumstances in America's cities effect "new eras," as with the present middle school movement. Supporters of middle schools do concede that various urban economic and social concerns were critical in early support for their movement. These concerns include (a) an interest in creating a new organizational form to counter the effects of de-facto segregation; (b) a strategy for recombining grade levels to offset the urban overcrowding of high and elementary schools; and (c) a bandwagon effect, where the middle school reform effort in one city leads to demand in other places to appear similarly innovative (Wiles & Bondi, 1993). In a society in which all school systems aspire to state-of-the-art thinking, "going to the middle school concept" has become *de rigueur*. The middle school is seen as scientific, developmentally appropriate, and efficient. In fact, each of these claims is hollow.

Critiquing the Middle School Movement

Advocates continue their professional championship of middle schools, claiming concern for the personal and social development of youngsters. While educators' concerns on this front may be admirable, modern societies do not intentionally construct social institutions primarily to meet the scientifically established psychological needs of children. To the contrary, formal institutions like schools emerge only when social change undermines, engulfs, or altogether sweeps away previously serviceable institutional establishments. If one understands the world in this way, it is easy to see that desegregation concerns, school enrollment pressures, and the bandwagon effect better explain the emergence of middle schools as institutions than does concern for the development of nascent adolescents. We admit, however, that the developmental rhetoric helps smooth the way.

In addition, plans for "softening" middle-level schooling (as compared to junior-high schooling) mirror trends at other organizational levels. During the previous 3 decades, the same phenomenon has been at work in high schools

(Cusick, 1983). Since the mid-1960s, high schools often have responded to demands to educate all students by diversifying their curriculum and lowering academic standards for students, while explaining such institutional changes as functions of student development and interest (Sizer, 1984). Although many students continued in college preparatory programs, students not considered capable of college entry were given elective programs where alternate career paths could be considered and where students' "psychological needs" frequently were the focus of school improvement efforts (e.g., Cusick, 1983; Jackson, 1992).

The language of school improvement for at-risk populations in our comprehensive high schools today, for instance, often approximates the language of middle school advocates. It sounds this way not because of psychological breakthroughs, but arguably because of the special problems most public schools face when charged to educate all local students, not just those intending college enrollment.

Consequences of Middle Schooling for Rural Community Survival

A critique of the warrant for middle schooling as presented by its defenders is relatively easy. But more is at stake in rural America than the outcome of a dispute about the discourse of middle-level schooling. Rather, on two accounts, the emergence of middle schools under the cloak of psychological progress can be destructive to both the declining sense of community in America and to the actual persistence of many rural communities still organized around K-8 or K-6 public schools.

Reflecting the urban bias of most education reform advocates, Wiles and Bondi (1993, p. 6) suggest that middle-grade schooling in elementary school buildings was eliminated in America decades ago. This finding will surprise many people in rural areas, where K-8 and K-6 schools are still common (though disappearing, as our analysis will show). Many rural communities in the U.S. cling to their remaining schools as social centers. Thus, talk of improving school systems by "moving to a middle school concept" can directly threaten rural elementary schools and, by default, those communities that surround them.

On one hand, rural school districts—typically at the behest of state education departments—often participate in nationally inspired school reform efforts. Having a middle school, for instance, is often understood to indicate a rural district with an educationally dynamic posture. On the other hand, school districts with small or declining student enrollments frequently have numerous small elementary schools that were themselves formed in decades past by consolidating even smaller two- and three-room schools. Often, the remaining small elementary schools have only

one or two classes per grade level, and such schools commonly comprise either K-6 or K-8 grade configurations. State education agencies are likely to target such schools for consolidation (combination and closure) as student enrollments drop.

Teachers and school superintendents often, if erroneously, maintain that larger schools are better schools and, further, more cost-effective to operate (Monk, 1991; Sher & Tompkins, 1977). In many county districts (the norm for school districts in the Southeast), the argument supporting increased curricular breadth and efficiency continues to serve as an acceptable warrant for consolidation efforts. In such districts, the result often has led to the creation of numerous small K-8 elementary schools and a single county high school (DeYoung, 1991, 1995). As dropout rates decrease, more and more seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds persist in high schools that once allowed (or encouraged) them to leave. Overcrowding in such places, coupled with national calls for middle schooling, have induced many districts to embrace "the middle school concept." Whatever the true motive for middle schooling, the innovation gives the useful appearance (no matter how erroneous) of dynamic leadership and fiscal caution.

Middle schools in rural places typically take one or two grade levels from both the high school and district elementary schools. Given demographic trends in much of rural America, within a few years the removal of an entire grade level (or two) can make elementary schools too small to receive state school-building subsidies. This circumstance facilitates consolidations and closures beyond those immediately required by the creation of a new rural middle school.

National and Regional Data

The Common Core of Data (CCD), a national dataset covering the school years 1987-1988 through 1991-1992, clearly suggests the power of "the middle school concept" to solve the problems of low school enrollment that characterize a nation neglectful of the importance of its small, rural communities. The CCD, developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (1993), contains directory-style information on every public school in the nation, including each school's grade span, enrollment, and, for the past five years, the school's locale type (see Table 1).

We first asked the National Data Resource Center (NDRC) to provide us with an estimation of the absolute and proportional changes in the number of middle-level schools between 1987-1988 and 1991-1992 (the years for which data used in the following comparisons are available). We defined middle-level schools as those with low grades greater than 4 and high grades less than 10, resulting in a variety of configurations that count as "middle schools."

Table 1
Type of Locale Codes

Type of Locale	Definition
Large City	Central city of a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), with the city having a population greater than or equal to 400,000 or a population density greater than or equal to 6,000 people per square mile.
Mid-size City	Central city of an SMSA, with the city having a population less than 400,000 and a population density less than 6,000 people per square mile.
Fringe of Large City	Place within an SMSA of a Large Central City and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.
Fringe of Mid-size City	Place within an SMSA of a Mid-Size Central City and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.
Large Town	Town not within an SMSA, with a population greater than or equal to 25,000.
Small Town	Town not within an SMSA and with a population less than 25,000 and greater than or equal to 2,500 people.
Rural	A place with fewer than 2,500 people or a place having a ZIP code designated rural by the Census Bureau.

Source: Johnson (1988).

Table 2
Changes Nationwide in Number and Percentage of Middle-Level Schools

	Type of Locale						
	Rural	Small Town	Large Town	Fringe of Mid-size City	Fringe of Large City	Mid-size City	Large City
number of schools 1987-1988	2297	3366	312	1371	1775	1857	1045
as percentage of all schools	10.09	17.01	16.07	16.80	15.76	15.56	13.95
number of schools 1991-1992	2710	3336	351	1365	1933	1884	1059
as percentage of all schools	12.08	17.58	15.18	16.40	15.74	15.32	13.12

Crosstabulations provided by NDRC indicated that, in rural areas, middle-level schools increased nationwide as a proportion of all schools over this five-year period (see Table 2).

We wish to highlight two observations from the data in Table 2. In rural areas nationwide, the proportion of schools that are middle-level schools increased roughly 20% (from 10.09% to 12.08%). This is in contrast to the national trend, where there was virtually no increase, and to the trend in urban areas, where the proportion of all schools that were middle-level schools *declined* by approximately 6% (from 13.95% to 13.12%).

We performed two further analyses to provide greater detail. We repeated the national analysis for the four-state region of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia, the region served by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL). Appalachian states, together with states like Vermont and New Hampshire, are among the most rurally populated areas of the nation. That is, while population density is low in comparison to urban locations, population dispersion is more uniform than is the case elsewhere (e.g., Colorado, Arizona). In short, ruralness does not mean vast spaces empty of population in states like those in this second analysis.

The results of this analysis accord well with the apparent national trends (see Table 3). Here again, there are · notable increases in the numbers and proportions of middle-level schools in rural areas, with decreases evident elsewhere.

In the next analysis, we examined the impact of the creation of middle-level schools on the existence of schools where middle grade students were previously educated.

Two likely effects of creating more middle-level schools are (a) the decline of traditional K-8 elementary schools and (b) the increase in the number of K-6 elementary schools.

To assess this possible effect, we created a more complex typology: (a) K-8 elementary; (b) primary or K-6 elementary; and (c) middle level. The middle-level configuration was defined as a school whose highest grade was no greater than 9 and no lower than 7 and whose lowest grade was 4 or higher. We calculated the frequencies of these three configurations in rural areas for the school years 1987-1988 and 1991-1992. We also assessed the enrollments for each type during these years (see Table 4).

The data in Table 4 support our two predictions, but also reveal another interesting trend. First, as predicted, we observe that the number and proportion of K-8 elementary schools declined in rural areas of the AEL region, whereas both the number and proportion of primary or K-6 elementary schools increased in tandem with an increased proportion of middle-level schools. Second, we note that in all three configurations the average enrollment per school increased over the five-year period.

Specifically, in the rural areas of the AEL region, the proportion of all K-8 elementary schools declined precipitously, both in number and in proportion to all schools: a 27% decline in number and a 24% decline on the basis of proportion. At the same time, however, the proportion of primary and K-6 schools and of the middle-level type increased by 12.6% and 11.3%, respectively. Average enrollments in the three configurations increased by 3.8%, 3.8%, and 10% for full elementary, primary or K-6

Table 3

Changes in Number and Percentage of Middle-Level Schools (AEL Region) by Type of Locale

		Type of Locale		
	Rural	Small Town	Fringe of Mid-size City	Large City
number of schools 1987/1988	193	225	109	166
as percentage of all schools	18.5	18.1	18.2	18.6
number of schools 1991/1992	219	231	110	153
as percentage of all schools	21.0	18.5	18.0	17.6

Note: Data omitted for types of locale with fewer than 50 schools. (See Johnson, 1988, for discussion of how the prevalence of types of locale varies substantially by state.)

elementary, and middle-level, respectively. From 1987 to 1992, student enrollment in rural areas of this four-state region declined 1.8% (from 750,799 to 737,133); the rural locale was the only locale to exhibit a decrease in this recent five-year period.

These data document what is happening and what our own experiences in rural schools also suggest: The creation of middle schools provides an opportunity for more widespread consolidation. New middle schools gather students in larger units, but their construction also provides the opportunity to close other schools—most likely the smaller K-8 types that will not be considered viable once their upper-grade students have departed. Unfortunately, K-8 schools are just those schools that Wihry, Coladarci,

and Meadow (1993) found to demonstrate the highest eighth-grade achievement in rural Maine, when other income and demographic factors were held constant.

The empirical data suggest that the middle school movement may have provided a convenient rationale for consolidating rural schools, at least in the five-year period for which national and regional data are available. Aided and abetted by such a philosophy, what we observe in rural areas may be the latest step in constructing "modernist" school systems that sort children into larger units of increasingly narrow age groupings in the name of efficiency and thoroughness. Interestingly, even in the mid-size cities of the AEL region, both the number and proportion of middle-level schools actually declined from 1987-1988 to 1991-1992 (by 7.8% and 5.4%, respectively).

What's Really at Issue?

Professional arguments that favor constructing middle schools in rural places are misguided. The arguments are based on urban precedent, but the urban challenges of system-wide overcrowding and desegregation dynamics—inspirations for the national movement—do not accord well with rural America's social or economic realities. Here, the transportation, economic, and demographic forces of the national culture for decades have been eroding rural towns, villages, and farms. Geographic and social communities disappear in rural America. Urban and suburban places confront challenges that differ from those that confront rural places, and they embody different commitments (DeYoung, 1987; Stern, 1994). Certainly the very existence of geographic entities is not at stake in urban and suburban areas (Children's Defense Fund, 1992; Hobbs, 1992).

Many professional educators also fail to recognize that, in addition to internal instructional purposes, schools enact social purposes for the larger community, and that alumni and community members often attribute greater significance to such purposes (Coleman, 1961; Waller, 1932). Imbued by their training with an understanding of young people based on decontextualized developmental perspectives, cosmopolitan educators typically believe that

Table 4

Rural Schools, Number and Percentage, by Configuration Type (AEL Region) with Mean Enrollment

	Full Elementary		Primary or K-6		Middle Level	
	1987-1988	1991-1992	1987-1988	1991-1992	1987-1988	1991-1992
Number	555	404	810	874	212	227
Percentage	27.7	21.0	40.4	45.5	10.6	11.8
Mean Enrollment	341.4	354.3	297.7	309.2	386.5	425.2

high school sports are merely a physical release for stu-
dents. Students, parents, alumni, and many local educa-
tors, however, often believe such activities are a primary
source of community identity and commitment. David
Tyack (1974) traces the evolution of such sentiments in
rural places:

> During the nineteenth century the country school
> belonged to the community in more than a legal
> sense: it was frequently the focus for people's
> lives outside the home. . . . In one-room schools
> all over the nation ministers met their flocks,
> politicians caucused with the faithful, families
> gathered for Christmas parties and hoe-downs,
> the Grange held its baked-bean suppers, Lyceum
> lecturers spoke, itinerants introduced the won-
> ders of the lantern-slide and the crank-up phono-
> graph, and neighbors gathered to hear spelling
> bees and declamations. . . . As one of the few
> social institutions which rural people encountered
> daily, the common school both reflected and
> shaped a sense of community. (pp. 15-17)

In urban places, of course, public schools may not
enjoy such popularity because they exist among many
other social institutions with more specialized functions.
Community social life in urban places occurs in a myriad
of nonschool settings, from the playhouse to the movie
theater to the roller rink and to the YMCA. Schools there
compete with other institutions, while in rural places schools
still remain a primary venue for many forms of social
organization (Peshkin, 1978, 1982). In our experience,
people in rural communities often consider curricular re-
forms at the schoolhouse as an internal issue for educators,
not to be confused with the importance of the schoolhouse
as a community resource. This difference of view helps
explain why many rural communities have resisted school
consolidation during this century: They do not so fre-
quently view formal instruction as the be-all and end-all of
education (DeYoung, 1995; DeYoung & Howley, 1992).
When rural people are skeptical of schooling, their skepti-
cism can, we think, make a lot of sense. Schooling is a
national enterprise carried on with little respect for com-
munities. It can perpetuate formal instruction that under-
mines more broadly conceived kinds of education (Howley
et al., 1995; Kamii et al., 1994).

Citizens, however, typically act in accordance with an
understandable illusion. In consolidation battles, they be-
lieve that they live in a democracy and that their voices in
such matters are entitled to be heard and heeded. They do
not realize that both court rulings and legislation clearly
define school districts as governmental entities in which
citizens actually have few vested rights. States have the
clear authority to create and abolish districts, as districts

have the clear authority to create and abolish schools—
with minimal input from the public (Howley, 1993). This
explains why citizens often feel that local hearings on
school closure are perfunctory exercises: They often are,
because the law requires only that such a hearing be held.
Consideration or disregard of input provided is almost
always within the discretion of the relevant authority.
Listening at a hearing, in short, is not required; if the law
gives the impression that citizens *will* be listened to, the
illusion conveniently serves vested interests (cf. Kemmis,
1990).

We submit that belief in the practical utility of middle
schooling in many rural places will further erode rural
communities, which continue to identify their local schools
as symbolic of and central to the very existence of their
social life (DeYoung, 1995). Recent events in West Vir-
ginia and Kentucky illustrate the point.

Twenty-six of West Virginia's 55 county school sys-
tems formed a "save our community schools" coalition to
oppose statewide school consolidation policy there in 1991
and 1992. They met with little success in opposing Gover-
nor Caperton's aim of consolidating over 200, mostly
elementary, schools by the year 2000 (approximately 200
schools have been closed since 1988). A smaller but equally
vocal group of defenders of community schools organized
in Kentucky in 1994 to oppose the consolidation of el-
ementary and secondary schools in that state.

In both Kentucky and West Virginia, in almost every
county with consolidation efforts inspired by their respec-
tive state educational agencies, the construction of middle
schools transpired. And in virtually every case, opponents
of the middle school concept as a tool of consolidation
argued that their communities were more important than
the restructuring of county school systems. In our view,
Americans in rural areas who continue to value a sense of
place and the importance of their own communities must
strenuously oppose the middle school concept when pro-
fessional educators begin to talk about school improve-
ment. Otherwise, they will help to improve their own
schools right out of existence.

Educational Trends in Opposition
to the Logic of Middle Schooling

The idea of the middle school is founded on the as-
sumption that the individual must constitute the focus of
pedagogy, and that theories of personal and psychological
development ought not merely to inform, but to dictate,
institutional practice (e.g., the creation of age-sorted units
within the institution of schooling). As we have suggested,
choosing to emphasize the psychological needs of indi-
viduals implies that the needs of communities and cultures
are less important.

In fact, using developmental need as the basis of institutional practice obfuscates, rather than clarifies, the reasons for action (Sheffler, 1985). The obfuscation rests on what Sheffler calls "the myth of uniformly valuable potentials" (p. 15). Just calling something a "need" does not render it valuable. Moreover, many needs are mutually exclusive; worse still, attempting to meet them all is pedagogically irresponsible. A "needs basis" can, in fact, be used to justify almost any action. The difficult challenge is to determine *which* needs ought to prevail.

But educational reform attending to such psychological needs is not the only initiative that one might undertake. As Kliebard (1986) doubtless would concur, each of the other three ideological views on the nature and purpose of schooling have agendas that may or may not overlap the ones that arise from the developmental logic of middle schooling.

One emergent school reform agenda that undercuts both the logic of consolidation and the segmentation of the school population by age is the concerted effort to restore school communities as caring places (Brown, 1991; Noddings, 1988; Sizer, 1984). In our view, such efforts fall within the social meliorist arena in Kliebard's scheme—but at least some of the positions in most of the ideologies of American schooling can easily accommodate features of this perspective. And, in fact, mainstream researchers and theorists have already begun to approve the idea that such reconstruction stands the best chance of success in small schools (e.g., Sergiovanni, 1993).

In any event, underlying this restructuring agenda is the conviction that schools themselves should constitute communities that require active parent participation. But this quality of participation is extraordinarily difficult to achieve in consolidated rural schools, as children and parents must travel ever longer distances to be a part of the life of a school so far removed from their homes. Even a 30-minute trip imposes a daunting barrier: And in many rural places, schools are much more distant. In particular, it is claimed, low-income parents and the parents of at-risk children need to become part of the school-community nexus to ensure the systematic enhancement of learner success (Schneider & Coleman, 1993). Thus, we regard as remarkably cynical efforts such as West Virginia's recent attempt to promote "community schools"—on the heels of one of the most successful rural consolidation efforts in the nation.

The vision of schools as caring communities stands in opposition to any policy that views community, especially the external community, as secondary to instructional ends informed primarily by the science of individual differences and psychological development. In light of the arguments now being made in favor of "schools for thought" and schools as "caring communities," the evident value of retaining rural schools of almost any size and configuration is substantial.

A somewhat different school reform effort, and perhaps most clearly inspired by the ideology of social efficiency, is the current "one-stop" human service center concept. In Kentucky, the recent state reform act has established and partly funded family and youth service centers currently being organized at all school sites with significant numbers of children and families living below the poverty level. Here, parents and children are encouraged to bring health, nutritional, and educational problems to the attention of service providers who are not primarily classroom educators. One criterion of success in this state will be the extent to which targeted families and children take advantage of services provided. Decentralizing and dispersing the centers (by organizing the centers at school sites) is hypothesized to reach more children and families than would be the case if services and/or service referrals were centralized. In rural places, at least, a clear contradiction exists between efforts to *de*centralize health and social services, while simultaneously centralizing educational services.

Middle Schooling and the Communitarian Critique of Liberal Theory

As we have attempted to demonstrate, pursuing the middle school concept in rural America is misguided and, moreover, it is harmful to small communities. Institutional models borrowed from metropolitan areas can be problematic at best. If communities place their trust in cosmopolitan educators, whose profession has historically been built upon individualistic sciences rather than on communitarian precepts, the result will serve nationally vested interests better than it serves those inherent in the unique and diverse rural places of America.

But this essay is not an attack on developmentalists or educators per se; all three of us are educators and parents, and we certainly appreciate the reality and wonder of human growth. Our discussion, moreover, is only partly about middle schools and related debates about the nature of transescence. Rather, our interpretation here reflects, in some detail, part of a greater debate in Western culture between liberal democrats and communitarians.

Since at least the 18th century, a basic dispute in Western social theory has taken place between thinkers who emphasize the rights of individuals (the bourgeois, capitalist position known as democratic liberalism) and those who stress explicit conceptions of the common good (cf. Kemmis, 1990). Champions of inalienable individual rights—including the right to an education tailored to one's own individual need—remain at odds with those who argue that the general welfare of collectivities (communities,

societies, nations) must take precedence over individual rights (Theobald & Newman, 1994). Which collectivity one values—particularly its level of aggregation or scale—differentiates commitments among those who might all refer to themselves as upholders of the communitarian tradition (Lasch, 1991). The recognition of this general cultural conflict is certainly well known to educators in their role as citizens. Looking outwards from the school, we can recognize this conflict in national debates over who has the right to bear what sorts of arms or whether governments ought to restrict development of wetlands or beach front property. At this level, we all know there is a debate and there are issues.

According to sociologists like Robert Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985, 1991), however, the erosion of community under the assault of individual rights during the 20th century severely affects how we as a people respond to collective political and cultural issues in the nation. Bellah and colleagues suggest that there may be important limits to personal autonomy and individual rights. In fact, they insist that we must honor these limits if American communities (and also the individuals who constitute them) are to persist and thrive. Any school reform initiative that might further erode community involvement and participation in the lives of schools would be a mistake, in our view—a mistake that reformers like Goodlad (1984, 1994), Sizer (1984, 1992), and others are taking some pains to reverse.

Middle schools in rural places, which precipitate the closing of any existing school that otherwise would not be consolidated, exact an unacceptably high toll on the quality of community life, in our experience. There are already far too few schools in this country, if what we value is the presence and participation of community and parents.

The critique of middle schooling as a strategy for school improvement lies at both the theoretical and policy levels, which we have taken care to document. It makes no ethical sense—none—to so misconstrue the needs of children (e.g., to a "developmentally appropriate" curriculum) that such "needs" come before the common good. A developmentally appropriate education, in fact, cannot exist separately from the particular places in which children develop: their homes, families, environs, local practices, and local cultures. Both John Dewey and his social meliorist colleague George Counts (1930/1971) understood this point instinctively, simply because it was abundantly clear in their day. The 20th century, we find, has already done great violence to rural communities and to the very idea of community. We conclude that, in the countryside, it is important to oppose school reform proposals that, like "going to the middle-school concept," disregard the well-being of rural communities.

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