Ulysses S. Grant Middle School: A Case Study of Transition

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Abstract

The acquisition of $76 million state tax dollars allowed Marion City Schools to renovate existing buildings and build additional schools. The existing three middle schools were combined into one large middle school, Ulysses S. Grant Middle School. A Transition Team was formed to research and report the most up-to-date middle school procedures. This case study examines some of the newest ideas in middle school practice to allow for the individual growth and development of all middle school students.
The florescent light shines onto the unscathed floor making it look wet and slippery. The blue border matches the bookcases, cupboards, and bulletin boards. The wipe-off board sits silently behind a package of unopened markers and an unsoiled eraser that has not yet been thrown in joy or in anger. My boxes are piled in a corner. The tape yielding to the summer heat is now weak and curling exposing the newest edition of the 6th Grade Science Proficiency Workbook.

The Long and Winding Road

In November 1999, Dr. Robert Theide, who was then the Superintendent of Marion City Schools, breathed a sigh of relief. The bond issue of 4.19 mills he had proposed to the citizens of Marion City, a mid-size, mid-Ohio town with a population of approximately 36,000 (Marion City Schools [MSC] n.d.), had passed. And with this, the State of Ohio would give Marion City Schools $76 million state tax dollars. He knew this was an opportunity for Marion that should not be ignored, and he was relieved that it was not.

When it all started, it was not surprising, in this rather conservative town, for many people to wonder, “What’s the catch?” And to their relief they found out quickly that there was no catch. The $76 million was part of a $500 million fund set aside by the State of Ohio to finance approximately 20-30 low wealth school districts across the state. Marion City Schools would work in partnership with the Ohio Schools Facilities Commission using the State’s Master Design Manual for specifications and requirements for renovations to existing buildings along with the brand new buildings (MCS, n.d.).
The new buildings included a new high school, the expansion of the high school building to accommodate the merging of the three middle schools into one, and three new elementary buildings. The “renovations” were not merely new chalkboards and coat racks, but air conditioning, science labs, computer labs, and larger classrooms. The buildings would also have security as a priority providing modern alarm systems, cameras throughout the building, fire sprinkler systems, and a more efficient heating system (MCS, n.d.). These were all things the buildings had needed for years.

Middle of the Road

Ulysses S. Grant Middle School would be the compilation of the three previously existing middle schools in Marion City: Baker Middle School, Edison Middle School, and Taft Middle School. How would this happen amicably as each were diverse and even competitive and had been for many years? How would the staff from these three buildings work in harmony after many of them had been together at the same middle school, or on the same team for 10 or even 15 years? Could the students from opposite sides of town find enough common ground to get through a school day or even become friends? The future was as frightening as it was exciting for everyone involved, students, parents, and teachers alike.
Table 1
The Facts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>White, non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Gifted</th>
<th>Disabled</th>
<th>Economic Disadvantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baker</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>89.40%</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>16.30%</td>
<td>15.50%</td>
<td>22.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edison</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>92.10%</td>
<td>3.90%</td>
<td>10.50%</td>
<td>19.70%</td>
<td>53.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taft</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>83.30%</td>
<td>12.80%</td>
<td>8.10%</td>
<td>18.70%</td>
<td>57.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the above statistics (Table 1) from the Ohio Department of Education, one can see the diversity between the middle schools, especially in the areas of race, giftedness, and economically disadvantaged students. Many teachers know that traditionally test scores are higher when income is higher (Trimble, 2002). While it is not fact, many teachers believe that behavior is a problem when income is a problem. Some of the teachers that would be taking on more economically disadvantaged students because of the transition were worried. Other teachers worried that the gifted students from the more affluent part of the city might be arrogant and spoiled hence also a problem. “Always present is the human inclination to resist change.” (Lounsbury and Vars, 2003, p.3) Teachers are no exception.

The Middle School Transition Team

Smith-Maddox (1999) said, “Dialogue is the single factor which seems to have the greatest power to assess our knowledge and carry forward our understanding of the teacher’s role in implementing the ideas of reform and proposed innovations.” (p. 286) Marion City School District agreed and developed The Middle School Transition Team in June of 2000. This team included three Administration Staff members and five staff members from each of the three middle schools (Marion City Schools [MCS], 2000). Because shared decision-making is an
important element in successful schools, this team would examine every aspect from every angle of the future U.S. Grant Middle School (Calderwood, 1999).

It has been 19 years since the 6-8 middle school became the most common form of school organization in the United States. While this sounds like a lengthy run, one must not forget that the first Junior High school to ever exist was formed nearly 100 years ago (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003). To find the most up-to-date theories and practices to make U.S. Grant Middle School a state-of-the-art middle school the Transition Team did their homework.

The Transition Team poured over the latest middle school research and sought the expertise of the staff at the National Middle School Association including Dr. John Swain, an educational consultant for middle grades education and a faculty member at Otterbein University. The Team traveled to other schools in central Ohio, which had also experienced renovations or expansions to learn about building designs and facilities management. They talked to countless principals and teachers who had experienced mergers and transitions. The Transition Team developed in-service opportunities for the middle school staff and teachers to address their concerns and relay information they had gathered (MCS, 2000). Many times, it was a thankless job, yet one necessary to insure communication and calm the nerves of parents, teachers, and students that would live this transition in the coming months.

Smaller as Better

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform is a group of education associations, foundations, practitioners, and researchers working to improve middle grade education. One of their recommendations for a successful school includes small, learning communities (Kasak, 2004). These small learning communities provide students with more
opportunities to participate in activities and have a sense that they “belong” (Cotton, 1996).

Small schools also allow greater attention to problems and success of all students (Gisolfi, 1999). This ‘school within a school’ theory also allows students to know who their teachers will be in the coming years (George & Lounsbury, 2000). Smaller schools are better for teachers and parents as well as students. In a smaller learning community teachers often have a better attitude toward their work and their administrators (Moriarty, 2002). Smaller learning communities also offer the benefits of both protection and outreach which are both important concepts in middle schools so that the students are “guided” rather than “thrown” through the system (Gisolfi, 1999). Jackson and Davis (2000) claim in Turning Points 2000 that dividing large populations of students into smaller groups “is perhaps the most exciting development of the past decade in the organization of middle schools.” (p. 125) Year after year, public opinion recognizes that class size can make or break achievement in a school (Weaver, 2004).

Grant Middle School will have approximately 1300 students. The Transition Team proposed that students be divided heterogeneously into four separate houses. Each house would act as a smaller school. Each house would have a principal, secretary, sixth grade team, seventh grade team, and eighth grade team. Once a student was assigned to a specific house they would stay with that house throughout their time at Grant Middle School. To ensure a heterogeneous group the Transition Team proposed that no requests or changes be made for specific houses, teams or teachers. The Transition Team made this suggestion for the teachers also (Marion City Schools Middle School Transition Team Proposal Summer 2001 Draft, [Draft], 2001).
Teaming

Among many other things, Jackson and Davis (2000) claim teaching teams “provide a psychological home within the school that helps reduce the stress of isolation and anonymity.” (p. 125) Teams provide middle grade students with additional teacher attention (Jackson and Davis, 2000), and a sense to students that they are “an important part of an important group.” (George and Lounsbury, 2000, p. 14) Teaming also helps teachers develop, implement and monitor educational goals for their students (Rottier, 2000).

As many teachers know, teaming is a process that takes time and patience to develop. There are stages that teams experience which begin with “teaming in name only” and progress toward full curriculum integration. In-between newly formed teams and long established teams there are a variety of issues. Successful teams function as teams, not as a group of individuals working in close proximity. Teams are not several teachers that share space, time, and students (Mizell, 2000), but share a mindset of ideas to best educate middle school students by increasing learning opportunities (Trimble, 2002).

The teachers at Grant Middle School will be a collection of teachers from all three middle schools intertwined into fresh teams. The Transition Team proposed that teams have common instructional planning time, rules, procedures and space in the new building (Draft, 2001). Through creative scheduling, they will be able to interact with their colleagues to cultivate curriculum integration and build a sense of community (NMSA, 1995). They will have time together to coordinate activities, and to “select ideas for in-depth study from a vast range of information and materials that are genuinely important and worth knowing.” (NMSA, 1995,
Since all of the teachers will be members of new teams, they will have work to do in establishing trust between each other, and a commitment to student needs.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

While curriculum for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in Ohio is, for the most part, predetermined by the State Department of Education, instruction is still the heart of every teacher. Instruction is not only what we do, it determines what kind of teacher we are, how we interact with students, if we love our job and if students remember us long after we’re gone. Instruction is the reason why many of us chose teaching as our career in the first place.

The Transition Team proposed that instruction be authentic (Draft, 2001). If students don’t value the information or are unable to apply it to their life, it will have little real meaning to them and consequently, their efforts will be minimal. The way we instruct is “only limited by our imaginations.” (Clark, 2004, p. 4) Student-centered instruction, instruction that allows students to explore, discuss, and decide create opportunities for all willing students to succeed. Project options which allow students to develop their own way to display their knowledge gives students choices in their learning which allows them to become more vested in their own education (VanHoose, Strahan & L’Esperance, 2001).

Technology will compliment instruction at Grant Middle School. New computers have been added in an expanded Technology room and in-class computers will be available in all 6th grade rooms. The district began using an on-line attendance, grade book, and lesson plan program last year. At the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year it will be mandatory for all teachers to use the new system. The district has provided teaches with continued support and
instruction throughout the school year. They have offered teacher in-service courses and teacher incentives to attend additional computer training.

Developmental Needs of Adolescents

The physical and emotional changes that characterize children ages 10-14 are as varied as the children themselves. Physically, growth does not occur evenly and emotionally, students are controlled by “dramatic changes in self-concept.” (VanHoose, Strahan & L’Esperance, 2001, p. 47) Secrets are a valuable ingredient in helping to create an adolescent’s identity (Perlstein, 2003). Teachers are also an important part of this developmental process. Teachers must show students that we believe in them and continually remind them that they possess unique talents and abilities (Clarke, 2004).

The relationship between students and teachers is also important to teachers, ranking highest overall in terms of professional importance and satisfaction (Shann, 1998). We must serve as role models to our students and be willing and able to continually trust students are doing their very best (NMSA, 1995). Despite what we may believe in April, our students are not lying awake at night trying to figure out ways to disappoint us.

Advocacy programs are an excellent way to nurture long-term student-teacher relationships (Draft, 2001). Caring adults can enhance a sense of security; provide guidance and encouragement and individual growth for middle grade students (VanHoose, Strahan & L’Esperance, 2001). Grant Middle School will employ an advisory program within each house to assure that every student will be well known by at least one adult (Jackson and Davis, 2000).
Dr. Santo Pino

The Middle School Transition Team was also responsible for helping search and interview for a Director to Grant Middle School. They suggested that the Director be responsible for public relations, report to the Superintendent and assist teachers and principals in curriculum and instruction whenever necessary (Draft, 2001). In September of 2002, Marion City Schools Board of Education hired Dr. Santo Pino as the Executive Director of Middle Level Programs.

Dr. Pino has spent nearly 40 years in education. He has served as National Middle School Association President and the Co-Executive Director of the Florida League of Middle Schools. Dr. Pino also helped design the educational program for Manatee Education Center in Naples, Florida, which was recognized by the state of Florida, and the U.S. Department of Education. Dr. Pino is a leader in middle school theory and practice and has presented on middle level education and leadership at state and national conferences (Personal communication, June 2004).

Dr. Pino spent countless hours educating the staff, teachers, students, and parents about the middle school transition. He held open forum meetings with numerous parents at numerous schools to address students, their parents, business leaders, and interested members of the community. He is the first to admit that change is never easy, but it is possible if everyone involved remains flexible.

In just a few weeks I’ll arrive at my new classroom in Ulysses S. Grant anxious to unpack the boxes, put up posters and make the room my own. I’m no different than any other teacher at
Grant Middle School who has been with Marion City Schools middle school for the last three years. For some teachers it has been painfully frustrating. For others it has been full of anticipation and excitement. Despite which side of the fence one stands, it has been an opportunity few teachers have the chance to experience. Many years from now it will continue to highlight my professional teaching career.
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The 2004-2005 school year will be Karen Hennessy’s sixth year teaching sixth grade Science for Marion City Schools, Marion, Ohio. She looks forward to the grand opening of the new Ulysses S. Grant Middle School.