Essential Articles on Parenting and Education
The 8th Grade School

Stanlee Brimberg, Upper School Coordinator,
Bank Street School for Children

Back in the days of the Little House on the Prairie, an 8th grade education was the industry standard, the measured dose of formal learning that American children swallowed before getting on with their lives. That made sense, in a way: there was the recognition that on an individual level as well as for the good of society, people should read and write and know how to do sums so that they could pray, use the almanac, compose letters, count the chickens and, later, file their tax returns. It was well and good to get some schooling, but the cow needed milking and the field needed tending. I have a strong hunch that the reason it was an 8th grade education rather than a 7th or a 9th grade education is that someone observed that most kids stop looking like kids just about the time they are fourteen.

The last four years of that eight-year journey, from around ten years old to around fourteen, were and are complex and profound. After the period of birth through age five, that span is probably the most significant in human development. It’s then that there are both gradual and rather sudden and radical changes in physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth. When reformers were looking at education at the beginning of the 20th century, a pivotal time in the history of education in America, they recognized that early adolescence didn’t quite fit into childhood or adulthood. But in their attempt to make things better for everyone, they took something away from the children in those important years.

The Introduction of Middle School

America had industrialized in the last quarter of the 19th century and European immigration, especially to the big cities, had put millions of people, many of them children, into the labor force. The reform movement took children out of factories and put them into schools; new compulsory education laws kept them there. These events provided educational reformers with both pressure and opportunity to think about what education might look like from that time forward. Lucy Sprague Mitchell (at Bank Street),
Caroline Pratt (at City and Country), and Hazel Hyde (at the Town School) were designing independent schools as laboratories for effective learning by focusing on what children needed as they grew; reformers debated about what public schools were for and how they could be used to advance society. The 8th grade school neither prepared citizens to participate actively in a democracy, as John Dewey urged, nor did it prepare workers as efficiently as promoters of the factory model would have liked.

So, the reformers first proposed to shorten the number of years children spent in aptly named “grammar” schools and to extend secondary education downward. The 8-4 configuration, that is, eight years of elementary education followed by four of secondary, would give way to a 6-6 configuration. Then, with the recognition that early adolescents are like amphibians, with a flipper in the ocean of childhood and a foot on the dry land of adulthood, that was modified to the 6-3-3 or 6-2-4 model. The concept of the junior high/intermediate/middle school was born, and while a few schools across the city and country continued as they had, the era of the 8th grade school effectively came to an end.

Most children probably had had enough of the 3 Rs and diagramming sentences by the end of 6th grade, and there was a need for change. But a number of benefits to the development of the individual as a learner and as a person that were part and parcel of the 8th grade model are entirely absent from the middle school model. So while the curricular reform might have been warranted, its cost has been enormous.

**Moving Back to the Small Village**

If the middle school experiment hasn’t been an abject failure, neither has it been a rousing success. Few people look back at their junior high days as the best in their educational lives; they were surely the worst in mine. But while the configuration still persists, states and municipalities are being awakened from this century of slumber by research which demonstrates that children who attend smaller 8th grade schools around the country get higher standardized test scores than their counterparts in middle schools.
Why?

One obvious advantage is that in an N or K-8 school, curriculum can be more easily sequenced and coordinated from early childhood through 8th grade. Information about individual students—how each learns, a record of achievement across many curricula—may be kept and shared over a period of years. A more cohesive and coordinated approach to education is easier to accomplish in one school than in two.

But there may be a more fundamental reason why 8th grade schools work: what the 8th grade school always had done in the past, maybe as a function of convenience, or just because of human nature, was to place a virtual tent around childhood. It provided the essential qualities of that village you always hear about that is required to raise a child, even an older one. For those older children in particular, the 8th grade school was as much just exactly what they needed as the middle school is not.

In an 8th grade school, children and the adults around them know each other well, and for a long time. While small town familiarity can be disconcerting for some people, especially city people who value a certain amount of anonymity, the beneficial consequences far outweigh the sacrifice of some privacy. Parents who have been involved with the school in a child's earlier years are much more likely to remain involved. Since long-term relationships among parents, teachers and students are inevitable, people notice when something is different about a child: if she or he is worried, for example, a teacher or other adult at the school will reach out to the child and to a parent. The members of this extended family are also there to encourage children they know, to root for them, and to celebrate with them. There is more often than not a tremendous sense of connection to the school. Supports for academic, emotional and community matters are natural outgrowths of the long relationships that evolve.

Students feel safe with their teachers and their classmates. When learners feel safe, they raise their hands to ask questions, they try out new tools and challenge ideas, and they even risk being wrong. They grow from those leaps beyond the familiar and comfortable.

Most children begin to learn about the world at school through play. The nature of that play changes as children proceed through the grades but,
to an extent, the comfort with which they enter into it depends on the continuity of their relationship with their peers. In 8th grade schools, middle-school-age classmates are former lower-school playmates; the modalities that cement learning, like using dramatization, dress-up, model building, and other extensions of play, are still very available. When early adolescents leave their elementary schools to attend middle schools, there are border crossings into new countries populated by children they don’t know, many of whom are older than they are. Disconnected from their roots as younger children, middle school students often feel that they have to look and act more grown up. They may feel pressure to abandon aspects of play that are quite useful in learning.

In K-12 schools, the presence of high school students can have a similar effect on younger students. While high school students can be engaging, supportive and intellectual, those behaviors are more typically seen by their peers inside classrooms. What their younger schoolmates see of them in common areas before and after classes, when they are in more social modes, can seem quite different. And while younger students might know many of the older students from the past, most K-12 schools have an infusion of ninth graders who are unknown to the younger students. In an 8th grade school, with no older children sharing the space, there is no one to imitate or emulate, no one for whose attention to compete, no one older making judgments about what you are wearing or what you say. Early adolescents are free to remain children for a little longer, and the comfort that follows from this builds confidence and competence.

As the older children in an 8th grade school, early adolescents can be role models for their younger classmates. It’s common for 8th grade schools to have buddy programs in which older students partner with younger ones over time. Sometimes older children are mentors in activities which solidify their own learning and contribute to self-esteem. Older children may be seen as protectors, and the notion that a younger child can have an older friend is a powerful one that in itself reinforces community.
8th Grade Students: Prepared to Enter the World

Early adolescents have so much to gain from the 8th grade school model: the acquisition of content knowledge; the building-up of not only academic but social skills that emerge from evolving relationships with other children; and the accumulation of self-knowledge that comes from a feeling of safety and strong relationships with trusted adult teachers. The 8th grade student is well positioned to ask the questions that inform the important life choice of where to attend high school: Who am I as a learner? As a person? What do I need in a school? Which schools would be a good fit for me?

In this year-long process, the student goes from practicing classroom activities that simulate making decisions of consequence, to participating in a real decision of great consequence.

In choosing a high school, the student goes from practicing classroom activities that simulate making decisions of consequence, to participating in a real decision of great consequence.

Schools today need to motivate students to use their intellect and their humanity to acquire skills, concepts and information that will enable them to communicate clearly and effectively with each other, to solve problems on the personal and community levels, to enter into positive relationships, and to make others and themselves happy. Because of its inherent configuration as a small village in the big world, the 8th grade school model—with its built-in supports for students as they grow and develop—naturally provides a setting in which students can work toward these goals.

Stanlee Brimberg is the Upper School Coordinator for the Bank Street School for Children in New York City.