

COMMENT FROM GUEST EDITORS

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In spite of impressive gains for young adolescents in middle level schools in the last 40 years, the goals, purposes, and functions of middle schools remain remarkably undefined, for educators as well as for the lay-public. Two key documents, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* by the Carnegie Corporation and *This We Believe* from the National Middle School Association, clearly outline the conceptual foundations and practical possibilities of today's middle schools. Concepts such as an adult advocate for each student, formation of teaching teams, integrated curriculum, and hands-on instruction are highlights of these documents and of middle schools themselves.

Recent research reinforces what middle school teachers have known for a long time; excellent middle schools are more than the sum of their parts. Fortunately, middle school development has moved well beyond only an emphasis on structural and school climate issues. As *Turning Points . . .* and *This We Believe* remind us, the key to developmentally responsive middle schools is curriculum, instruction, and assessment focused on the unique needs of young adolescents. That is why the articles in this issue of *JRRE* are so critical; they focus on compelling instructional issues most important in today's middle schools.

Thanks for this special issue are due to Dr. Theodore Coladarci, who recognized that middle level issues are as important in rural schools as in their urban and suburban counterparts. The history of middle school development is different in rural areas and is much closer to the heart of what middle schools ought to be. In many suburban and urban areas early middle school development meant converting junior high schools into middle schools. In many rural areas, adopting middle school philosophy and practice was more subtle. How can we provide the best possible program for young adolescents in schools with younger and older students?

Middle level education seems to be at a crossroads of sorts, moving away from the more technical aspects of middle school development to the deeper structures that define a school. Since the early 1990s, the focus in middle level schools has moved from concern for structural change (time schedules, block scheduling, organization of students and teachers into teams) and climate changes (programs like advisor/advisee) to more fundamental issues surrounding curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

The articles in this special issue reflect these concerns. We wish to thank the authors of these excellent pieces, who have contributed significant thinking about the issues most important to middle level educators today. We know that readers will appreciate the authors' subtle association as they connected the unique qualities of young adolescents with their particular curricular or instructional focus.

Today middle level education leads the way for all levels on the K-12 continuum. High schools, struggling to meet the demands of older teens, have turned to programs that look remarkably similar to middle level programs: advisory programs, teams of students and teachers, more integrated curriculum, and service learning, to name a few. Elementary schools are also looking to middle level philosophy and practices as a return to their own child-centered roots. We hope that this special issue of *JRRE* is useful to anyone working at any level of public education.

The middle school movement has had a significant impact on schools around the world and will continue to do so because of the attention given to the developmental nature of young adolescents. While some may consider it ironic that rural schools have much to say about middle school development, using rural schools as a lens for middle schools is especially appropriate.