

MIDDLE SCHOOLS' DIRECTORY, 1995

*The introduction to a new publication - a directory of the
approximately 840 middle schools in England.*

INTRODUCTION

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The concept of the middle school has been around much longer than people think. First mentioned in government publications as early as 1856 they were also referred to in the Hadow Report of 1927 and first secured official blessing as a form of educational organisation in 1964.

Their appearance in both 8 to 12 and 9 to 13 form, was, of course, inextricably bound up with the introduction of comprehensive education and the Plowden Report of 1967. In many places they provided, in terms of existing building stock, a convenient means to the abolition of selection. Theoretically they were underpinned, at least in their 8 to 12 form, by the recommendation from the Plowden Committee that such a three tier system should be established nationally.

The great flowering of middle school systems occurred, therefore, in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. Since the mid 1980s, however, the climate has become a good deal chillier for middle schools. In 1983 HMI undertook a major survey and came to the conclusion that middle school systems would be hard pressed to offer appropriate specialist provision as pupil numbers fell. At the end of 1990 the Audit Commission Report "Rationalising Primary School Provision" one-sidedly listed "Five Key Attractions" of converting to a two tier system. Only one of these purported to be educational and that, as we shall see, does not bear careful examination. Moreover a form of educational organisation so closely associated with the removal of selection has sometimes been seen as inappropriate to a world dominated by market forces, competition and "choice and diversity". The response of some LEAs has therefore been to "tidy up" the inconsistencies created by Local Government Reorganisation in 1974 by restoring the traditional two tier system with transfer at 11. Ironically the proposed reorganisation of English counties in 1996/97, in so far as it restores some of the boundaries which were abolished in 1974, will make this reason for change redundant.

Superficially, therefore, middle schools in the 90s face an uncertain and difficult future. The reality, however, for those prepared to think carefully about the educational implications of a middle school system, is very different.

Firstly, a middle school system ensures that, since national

curriculum testing will not occur at the end of an organisational phase of education, it cannot be misused as a selection device. With the government still intent on introducing league tables at the end of key stage 2, when they judge the tests to be satisfactory, this must be a very real possibility. At whatever point in a school's life league tables appear they are naturally likely to influence parental choice but the edge will certainly be taken off the situation when the testing is one or two years away from the point of transfer. Given that the ostensible purpose of testing is diagnostic in relation to the needs of individual children, anything which mitigates the misuse of results must be an advantage.

Secondly, because pupils will remain with their teachers for at least one year after the end of key stage 2, the diagnostic purpose of national curriculum assessment can be fully developed. The chasm which has traditionally existed between primary and secondary schools in the traditional two tier system can only be deepened once it coincides with the move from key stage 2 to key stage 3. The individual pupils' needs are much more likely to be addressed when they continue to attend the same school with the same staff before and after key stage testing.

Thirdly because either one third or two thirds of the preparation for key stage 3 assessment will take place in the middle school there is a powerful built in incentive for liaison between tiers. This is vital in any educational system, given that any organisational device is just a way of making a continuous process more manageable. But in the traditional two tier system the potential finality of assessment at the end of key stage 2 is likely to reduce liaison.

Finally, there is the intriguing question of children's attainment in years 5 and 6. Early results from the work of HMI and OFSTED seem to indicate that there is nationally something of a dip in pupils' performance at this crucial stage and it has fuelled suggestions that there should be increased specialisation for teachers in the upper end of traditional junior schools. In the middle school systems, of course, such pupils are in schools with more specialist facilities and more specialist staff than would otherwise be the case. Early evidence that this dip in pupil performance does not occur in middle school systems gives strength to the view that this is, educationally, the sounder approach to the education of these age groups.

When one adds all these advantages to those which Plowden identified, especially the beneficial social effects of the three tier system on the educational experiences for years 7, 8, 9 and 10, compared with a two tier system, there is really no escape from a very firm conclusion. The three tier system is actually more suited than any other to deal with children's educational needs in the new context set by recent legislation, both now and beyond the millennium.