

## MIDDLE SCHOOL

In the best of all socialist worlds every child of secondary school age would be attending a purpose-built, all-through comprehensive. Since, however, the nation has neither the money nor indeed the unanimity to apply this ideal immediately there must be compromise. Once this is admitted it is obvious that the pressures towards compromise will be of two sorts. There will be some people who dislike the very idea of comprehensives. They will hope to temper the harsh rigour of the principle. But there will be others who accept the principle but are forced to put forward plans in which it is modified by the practicalities. Some, in short, could but would rather not. Others would if they only could.

It is not yet clear how far the Government will be prepared to compromise on the ideological plane. For that we must await their final attitude to the public and direct-grant schools and to those local education authorities that resist them. On the practicalities, however, Circular 10, 65 showed long since how far the MINISTER was prepared to be accommodating. Now he has announced a concession that softens still further that already permissive document. He is prepared to look more readily than was once the case on schemes of organization that envisage middle schools for the age group nine to 13.

It is by no means to the discredit of the MINISTER and his Department that they should have changed their attitude in this matter, though one can suspect, that there has been vigorous advocacy that they should do so. And it may well be that the change will affect planning far beyond those local authorities that seem likely to take immediate advantage of it. Just how widespread may be the welcome was borne out by the circumstances in which MR. CROSLAND made his announcement. The idea of the middle school has come to be associated with the West Riding; but the inquiry which led MR. CROSLAND to return to it in the Commons last week originated from Orpington in Kent.

So this is an idea that could well catch on. It is not particularly novel, save in its application to the local authority schools. A middle school for the age group nine to 13 presupposes, of course, an earlier school for the five to nines and a later one from 13 on. This is not much different from the pre-preparatory, preparatory and public school sequence that obtains in the independent sector.

The advantages of the scheme to the local education authorities have already been much canvassed. With a year or two lopped off their entry, it is argued, the existing secondary schools would have room for the coming raising of the leaving age. Extra building at the secondary level would not be necessary. Building, where it was necessary, could be contained at the primary level, where it is cheaper and overdue.

Those are material arguments. Educational advantages may be claimed as well. A scheme which allows the pupil a clear four years at least in each of his schools is obviously better than some of the plans put forward, which would scarcely allow the pupil time to settle down in one institution before he was being re-deployed for the next. A scheme, too, which extends the primary school approach to the curriculum beyond its present limits may well have something to commend it. Long before Mr.

Crosland got up to his comprehensive tricks people were making out a case for this particular reform.

These are formidable recommendations; but there must be equally formidable doubts. For a start, it is dangerous to argue from the independent sector of schooling to the local authority sphere. The private equivalent of the West Riding middle school is common enough in the independent sector but there it is a regular part of a relatively uniform system. In the mass of local authority schools, even if it was widely adopted it would still be a relative anomaly. In that respect it could only add to the fragmentation of secondary schooling. Already, with an increasingly mobile population it is being asked how far we can afford to have one system operating in one place and something different elsewhere.

Then there is staffing. The middle school may suit a particular locality. But the training of teachers is done on a national pattern. Would it be economic for the colleges of education, or the university departments, to produce teachers for the special age range of the middle school? What career prospects could it offer?

Here as with much else about the middle school we are as yet walking in the dark. It is indeed difficult not to reflect that Mr. Crosland's own original hesitation about this school arose from doubts about the age of transfer. So much is clear from Circular 10/65. With the Plowden report still to come these doubts are still unresolved. Mr. Crosland was impatient of waiting. That inevitably exposed him to schemes whose long-term future must be uncertain. His latest move on the middle school will be seen by some as an adventurous compromise between the socialist ideal and local difficulties. Others will more prudently assess it as just one more leap in the dark.