

What Works Clearinghouse



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WWC Quick Review of the Article “The Negative Impacts of Starting Middle School in Sixth Grade”†

What is this study about?

This study examined whether placing sixth graders in middle schools rather than elementary schools affects their behavior and academic performance.

The study analyzed North Carolina data on about 40,000 sixth graders attending a middle school and about 5,000 sixth graders attending an elementary school during 2000-01.

The study authors used statistical matching to select similar middle and elementary schools for analysis. They matched schools on racial and ethnic composition, average test scores, and other characteristics.

The authors analyzed data on test scores and disciplinary infractions drawn from a statewide database covering all public schools.

What Two Groups of Sixth Graders Were Contrasted?

Sixth graders attending middle schools that included sixth, seventh, and eighth grade; these schools had, on average, 257 sixth graders

Sixth graders attending K-to-6 elementary schools; these schools had, on average, 117 sixth graders

What did the study authors report?

Sixth graders in middle schools were about twice as likely to have a disciplinary infraction as sixth

graders in elementary schools. Sixth graders in middle schools also had lower scores on standardized reading tests than sixth graders in elementary schools. There were no statistically significant differences in math test scores.

The WWC has reservations about the results because they may be affected by differences between the research groups that were not controlled for in the analysis.

WWC Rating

The research described in this article is consistent with WWC evidence standards with reservations

Strengths: Used statistical procedures to match similar middle and elementary schools.

Cautions: Despite statistical matching, there were still some differences in the characteristics of the two groups of schools. For example, middle schools were in larger districts and had fewer economically disadvantaged students. The study authors used statistical techniques to adjust for these differences. However, differences in district policies, characteristics of the student body, and other factors not controlled for in the analysis may affect the results.

†Cook, P., J., MacCoun, R., Muschkin, C., & Vigdor, J. (2008). “The negative impacts of starting middle school in sixth grade.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 27(1), 104–121.